

master of puppets, i'm pulling your strings

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20094871) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20094871>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/F , M/M
Fandom:	Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Relationships:	Robin Buckley & Billy Hargrove , Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington , Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington , Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson , Robin Buckley/Heather Holloway
Characters:	Robin Buckley , Billy Hargrove , Steve Harrington , Dustin Henderson , Maxine "Max" Mayfield , Will Byers , Mike Wheeler , Lucas Sinclair , Eleven Jane Hopper , Nancy Wheeler , Jonathan Byers
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Canon Rewrite , Fix-It , Angst with a Happy Ending , Hurt/Comfort , Gay Billy Hargrove , Lesbian Robin Buckley , Bisexual Steve Harrington , Humor , Season 3 rewrite , billy and robin are the wlw/mlm solidarity we deserve , and billy isn't flayed anymore , because fuck canon i guess , Mention of torture , Aftermath of Violence , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Period-Typical Homophobia , Internalized Homophobia , Homophobic Language
Language:	English
Collections:	Good Readings (ymmv) , Krystals Collective , Harringrove makes me wanna jump off a cliff but in a sexy way , so cute im gonna strangle myself , kirb's five star works ★★★★★
Stats:	Published: 2019-08-03 Completed: 2019-09-29 Words: 39,599 Chapters: 4/4

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by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

And to make matter's worst, which is just her luck, really, no surprises there, a car turns the corner, engine roaring, and slows down as it nears the school. Not any car either, no. Billy Hargrove's blue Camaro is a one of a kind car here in Hawkins, and right now, it's screeching to a halt.

Great. That's just— *great*. The town's douchebag, just what she needed.

He rolls down the window, lays on his charm, giving her the kind of grin that makes the girls swoon in the halls. Too bad for him, really, this kinda shit isn't gonna work on Robin. "Hey there, beautiful. You wouldn't happen to have seen my sister, would you?"

Robin frowns, gives him an unimpressed look. Not really what she had been expecting, but better than being harassed. "Do I look like I know who your sister is?"

*

or, Robin has car trouble and somehow, that changes everything.

Notes

okay, this was a prompt on tumblr and because I have no self-control, this kinda spiraled into this. Hope you guys like it, though. <3

also, be warned, there's no explicit violence, but expect the aftermath of torture and canon levels of violence.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

before

“Fucking piece of shit, mother *fucking* shitty death trap,” Robin vehemently hisses at her car as she lays it on the horn once, throws the door open, and kicks the front tire. “Goddamn it, should’ve taken the fucking bus! Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.”

The school parking lot is empty because it’s way past the time any teenager would hang around the school, any teenager aside from Robin, probably, because she’s the only freak who had to stay in late practicing the clarinet for the next week’s prep rally. Then again, she would like the record to show that if her parents had deigned to buy her a damn clarinet, she wouldn’t have to stay late and practice with dirty, cheap school one.

So what she’s really trying to say is that if she gets mugged or you know, *murdered*, it’s all her dad’s fault.

And to make matter’s worst, which is just her luck, really, no surprises there, a car turns the corner, engine roaring, and slows down as it nears the school. Not any car either, no. Billy Hargrove’s blue Camaro is a one of a kind car here in Hawkins, and right now, it’s screeching to a halt.

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Hargrove huffs, dropping the act and closing his eyes like he’s trying really hard not to scream. “Tiny red-head, always fucking yelling shit. Probably had a gaggle of nerds with her. You seen her?”

Gaggle of children? Why would they be in the high— *oh*, actually, Robin kind of remembers a lot of running after hours? She thought the drama kids had been rehearsing some weird shit again, but now—

“I might,” she answers, leaning on her door. There’s an idea, and it’s crazy, and it’s probably going to end up with Hargrove tearing out of there or fucking kidnapping her or some shit, but Robin’s getting a little desperate here. The next bus is due in like, a whole hour, it’s gonna be *dark* by then. “Might have heard where they were going, too.”

Now, Hargrove doesn’t perk up, but there’s a weird wave of relief that she can clearly see wash over him before it’s replaced by his smarmy doucheness again. “Well?”

Robin grins. “*Well*, my car here broke down.”

“Not my fucking problem, do I look like a mechanic to you?”

“As I was saying,” she glares, “my car broke down, so say, if someone were to give me a ride home, it might jog my memory a little.”

“You’ve got be shitting me,” he stares at her, scoffs, and checks his watch. A weird nervousness creeps in on his shoulders, on the way he sits up a little straighter and drums his fingers on the wheel. Then, gritting his teeth, “fine, Jesus, you’re such a bitch. I’ll give you a ride, but we’re picking her up first.”

Her grin widens and Robin hurriedly picks up her backpack and locks her car before throwing herself on Billy Hargrove’s passenger seat. Somewhere in their pink little rooms, every straight girl in their school is wailing in jealousy. It’s funny in a very ironic kinda way.

He gives her an impatient look. “So?”

“Okay, do you know how to get to the quarry?”

*

“If you’re fucking with me,” Hargrove snarls for about the tenth time in like, fifteen minutes, as he drives like a maniac and Def Leppard screams from the speakers. As it is, Robin only rolls her eyes.

“Dude, that’s way too much effort,” she says, slouching further on her seat, and watches the trees grow in number at the side of the road. They’re almost there now. “And it wouldn’t be very smart of me anyway, considering the quarry would be a prime spot for a murder.”

He grunts. Then, because apparently, life in Hawkins is fucking weird, the headlights hit the crook on the road where most people park before trekking into the woods and, get this, they illuminate a preppy little Beemer.

“Harrington,” Hargrove grumbles, hitting the wheel as he throws his car beside the Beemer, parking haphazardly, and nearly sending Robin squashed against the door. He glares fiercely at her, lighting up a cigarette, “stay the fuck here.”

Yeah, no, that’s not gonna happen. One, Robin’s not gonna stay alone in a car in the dark just waiting for someone to murder her or something, and two, she’s invested in this now, alright. So she’s curious, sue her.

Robin spills out the car just in time to see Hargrove squinting at the dark trail where a bunch of tiny lights is approaching. “Well,” she says, sidling up to him, “at least they remembered to bring flashlights.”

“What the fuck did I say about staying in the car?” Hargrove snaps at her, crossing his arms over his chest all macho. It makes her choke on a snort. Man, boys are so fucking dumb. “Do you have some kinda death wish, shitbird?”

“I have a *name*, thank you very much,” she glares right back, crossing her own arms in a challenge, “it’s Robin and you can use it if you don’t want to get decked.”

Hargrove grins, delighted for a second. “Is that so, shit *bird?*”

Robin rolls her eyes. “Really? That’s the best you can come up with?”

Before they could say anything else, the sounds of talking came closer, and Robin heard some variations of *oh, shit* as the kids appeared from out of the woods. Hargrove snapped his attention to them, a scowl on his face that looked like it could set them on fire. “What the fuck were you *thinking*, Maxine?”

“Fuck *OFF*, Billy,” a, well, tiny red-headed girl screams stomping ahead of the little group, which, now that they’re somewhat in the light, she can see includes Steve Harrington. “What are you even *DOING* here?”

“Picking you the fuck up because you missed curfew again like a dead fucking idiot,” he snarls back, but his eyes are now focused on Harrington, dark and sharp. “The better question is, what are *you* doing alone with the kids *again*, Harrington?”

Which, to be fair, Robin thinks is a fair question.

The kids, six little nerds, are now sort of around Harrington? Like, like, six tiny little bodyguards and it’s kinda funny, and Robin can see it’s kind of annoying Harrington a little too, but it’s not like he can say anything, what with the weird standoff he’s having with Hargrove.

“Stopping them from traipsing alone in the woods at night like shitheads, Hargrove,” he snaps back, and *oh, shit*, he’s got a– is that a bat? With *nails*? “Now, are you going to be a problem?”

Hargrove just stares at him and he stares back, and it’s getting too weird for Robin, okay, so *fuck this*, she decides. “Is that a bat with nails?”

Harrington seems to startle, blinking at her like he's only now realizing she's there. "I'm sorry, but who are you?"

"Oh, my GOD, Billy," Hargrove's little sister groans, "did you seriously bring one of your *girlfriends* here?"

"Excuse me?" Robin scoffs, giving her a very unimpressed look, "I have taste and standards, okay? I'm Robin and I'm just trying to get a ride home."

"From *him*?" Harrington gapes, then seems to realize he was being kinda rude, "I mean, no offense— no, you know what, full offense. All the offense."

"Nice one, pretty boy, I'm *wounded*," Hargrove laughs. Although, Robin thinks there's not a lot of humor there. "I can be a real gentleman, you know."

And— okay, literally everyone, Robin included, has to snort at that.

"Hey, hey, okay, it's just— I have to ask," she raises her hand, wiggling her fingers, and then gesturing all *that*, "is this, like, a cult situation?"

Hargrove smirks, slow and predatory. "Yeah, King Steve, answer the lady."

"No, it's not— it's not a cult, alright?" Harrington goes red in the face, gesturing a lot as he speaks, "the kids— they wanted to hit the quarry and I'm not— it's not like I could stop them! "

"That's freaking weird, dude," she says, shrugging, the kids seem to be fine, so. It's more pathetic for him than anything, she figures. "You're their babysitter?"

"We don't need babysitters!" One of the kids cries, all pouty and shit.

“Yeah, Steve’s the coolest, that’s why he’s our friend,” another one with curly hair adds.

“Can we just GO?” Hargrove’s sister says, stomping in the direction of the Camaro, “Billy, remember the fucking deal!”

Hargrove’s face goes blank and hard, and he grumbles, glaring murderously at Harrington as he steps on his cigarette. “Come on, shitbird. The fuck do you live?”

Robin shrugs, following back to the car when Harrington’s voice rings. “Hey, Robin, right? You can ride with me if you want?”

She studies him and his tiny little bodyguards, his preppy Beemer, and back at Hargrove and his sister, he’s shoving her things in the backseat and the passenger seat is open. Robin doubts she’d get shotgun with Harrington. “Nah, I’m fine, dude, no worries.”

*

“So you’re *not* his girlfriend?” Hargrove’s sister— *it’s Max, I’ll punch you if you call me Maxine*— asks, leaning between the seats, “or, I don’t know, *friend*?”

The way she says *friend* leads Robin to believe she means something between Girlfriend and Friend, and that it Robin is in some way attracted to her troll of a brother. Robin cackles. “No, kid, not really my type,” she winks, “like I said, *standards*. ”

“I’m still fucking here, you know,” Hargrove grumbles, still driving like a fucking psycho.

“Okay, so why *are* you here?” Max continues her interrogation.

“My car broke down,” Robin shrugs, “I really needed a ride home.”

“So *he* offered you a ride?”

Now, Hargrove snorts. “No, Maxine, she fucking blackmailed me into giving her a ride.”

Max looks at her with wide, delighted eyes. “Oh, my god, seriously?”

“Yup.”

“That’s *awesome*, ” Max crows, falling back into her seat as her brother cuts a corner harshly, parking on Robin’s driveway halfway up the curb. “You’re *so cool*. ”

“Get the fuck out, shitbird,” Hargrove snaps, scowling, and Robin laughs, internally flinching at how similar it sounded with his earlier laughter. Yeah, it’s really late and her parents are *not* gonna be happy.

“You’re welcome, asshole,” she says, throwing the door open, and grimaces at the lights in the living room, “oh, man, my dad’s gonna kill me.”

To be fair, she thinks he might be a bit relieved Robin is with a *boy*, like a normal girl her age, and her mom will probably lecture her forever but then *wink* like she thinks Robin is finally doing something normal too.

“Hey,” Hargrove grunts, and Robin turns, backpack in hand and ready to get out. He’s got a cigarette on his lips and his face is all blank again, unreadable, but she doesn’t miss the way his eyes flicker to the living room lights too. When he speaks, it’s quiet. “You gonna be okay?”

Something flickers on his face and Robin thinks she’s missing something huge here about him, tries to add his concern to his general douchebagginess and finds that it’s an awkward fit.

Still, she smiles. “Yeah, I’ll be fine, dude. See you, losers.”

Weirdly, the Camaro doesn't peel away until Robin is locking the door behind her.

*

It's not like Robin expected to like, become buddy-buddy with him after or even any sort of recognition at all, she knows how High School works, and she knows how Billy Hargrove's brand of peacocking douchebaggness works, so she's not surprised when he ignores her as usual.

She is a little surprised when Steve Harrington corners her outside English. "What's this?"

He blinks at her, looks down where he had been holding her arm to steer them out of the way, and drops his hand hastily. "Sorry, I just wanted to ask— are you alright?"

"Hm, yes?" She raises her eyebrows, "why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you, uh. Last night, you drove off with Hargrove, so. Just checking."

Robin snorts, remembering the interrogation Max had put her through. Harrington clearly hasn't talked with his children yet. "Thanks for the concern, but I can handle myself. Besides, wasn't him that was traipsing in the woods at night with a bunch of children."

Harrington makes a face, throwing his hands up. "Look, you don't know them, okay? It's like, impossible to stop them from doing stupid shit, they were going to probably lock me in a classroom and steal my car if I hadn't gone with them! That was, believe it or not, the best-case scenario!"

"What *were* you doing in the woods anyway? That place gives me the creeps at night."

“That’s, uh. That’s classified,” he tries to sound confident and all snotty, but Robin can hear through the fake- loftiness, snorts. “Okay, they were looking for something– it’s about their Dungeon and Dragons shit, I don’t know. They never tell me shit.”

“Right,” she snickers again. Harrington looks like a stressed mother of six alright.

“And hey, I mean it,” he says, growing serious, “if he gives you shit, let me know okay? I know he’s all, you know, but he– last year, he almost beat my face in, okay? Totally lost it on the kids, too. He’s a real asshole. So.”

Robin sucks in her teeth, considering his words. Harrington is trying to say Hargrove is dangerous and she should stay away, and well, he’s making a good case of it, Robin has to give him that. She kind of remembers the state of his face last year, all black and blue, and she remembers Hargrove’s cracked wrist. Rumors of their fight had been *legendary*.

“Okay, thanks for the gossip,” she smiles all fake sweet, and slips out his space, “it’s not like we’re friends or anything, anyway.”

And that should have been that.

*

Except, Robin is, unfortunately, terribly cursed with the gift of being too smart for her own good.

It’s a tragedy, truly.

So, she’s super smart and she *notices* things. Like, for example, now that both Hargrove and Harrington are more than just names, now that she’s *curious* about what the fuck is going on there, she’s more *aware* of their presences in the halls.

So, she notices.

Robin sees the way Hargrove follow him with his eyes when he thinks Harrington's not looking, and she sees how his face does a thing whenever Harrington's walk in the room. She sees how casual he is with a different girl hanging off his arm every day but inevitably cuts a glance at Harrington as he walks by. She sees all that and thinks *oh*.

This is interesting.

This is— everyone keeps telling her to stay away from him, but if Hargrove is— if there's a chance she's not alone in this small, small town in the middle of nowhere—

Robin's heart races, and for the first time, she watches Tammy watch Harrington and feels a little less alone.

*

She corners him at his locker when Tommy and Carol aren't there being nuisances for once. She stops there, waits for him to slam his locker closed, and notice her.

"Shit, the fuck you doing here? *Jesus*, almost gave me a heart attack," he snaps, glaring at her.

"Can we talk?" She goes straight to the point, not sure she'd have the courage to follow through if she beats around the bush. "Like, in private?"

Hargrove makes a face, dripping with pity and condescension. "Look, shitbird, sorry, but I'm just not interested—"

"Yeah," Robin says, then looks pointedly at Harrington passing by, "I know you're *not* interested."

The shift is instantaneous. Blind panic flashes on his eyes and the next thing she knows he's dragging her to the parking lot and roughly shoving her into the passenger seat of his car. "I don't know what the fuck you think you know, but that's not the kind of shit you can go around saying unless you want to fucking die, okay? I don't beat up women, but I'm sure Carol would be real happy to tear into your face. Fucking ruin your life, hear me?"

"Jesus Christ, dude, *chill*," she glares, rubbing at her wrist. What is it with these boys and grabbing people by the arm? "I didn't say I was gonna, like, tell the whole school."

"Right, blackmail's more your thing," he glares, snarling at her.

"Would you just— it's not—" she flounders, losing her nerve. What if *he* decides to tell the whole school? By all means, that's an asshole move and Billy Hagrove's nothing if not an asshole. But Robin, she's so, so tired of keeping this locked inside. Having someone, even an asshole, to talk about this with, someone *like her*, it's—

"I know all about pining for straight people, okay?" She finally says, rushing the words all in one breath, and looks down at her hands, bracing for whatever comes next. No turning back now, no take backsies.

There's a long minute of silence in the car and Robin thinks she might burst if he doesn't say anything soon, and maybe this was a terrible idea, maybe she was wrong after all, or maybe she wasn't but he still thinks she's a freak, fuck, she needs to get out of here—

"Fucking sucks, doesn't it?" Hargrove says, and when Robin finally risks a glance at him, he's smoking a cigarette and holding the steering wheel like it's gonna solve all of his problems. He's got a fading black eye, too, she notices.

Robin nods, exhaling a shuddery breath, and huffs a laugh, feeling relieved as shit. "Like hell. Can I bum one?"

"Those will kill you, you know?" He throws her his pack, then his lighter.

“Not if Tammy’s stupid pretty face kills me first,” she grumbles, and *shit*, it feels good to say it out loud.

Hargrove laughs, startled.

*

When she arrives the next day to no one whispering about her liking girls, it cements on her mind that Billy Hargrove and her were friends now. This is the sort of thing only friends should know about so there’s no helping it. They were stuck with each other.

And Billy seems to think so too as he drops by her locker, grumbling about Harrington’s stupid jeans, and walks her to their Math class.

At lunch, he steals a quarter of her sandwich and lets her whisper about Tammy’s new haircut.

Sometimes, they sit at his car and smoke cigarettes in silence, just contemplating how fucked they are or something, and sometimes they rant about whatever shit there is to rant.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

And like, sure, people talk about it. This weird random friendship, but it’s not like Billy’s always hanging out with her. He still spends nearly all his time with Tommy and his stupid friends, and Robin has band practice and her band friends. They just talk, sometimes, because there’s no one else to talk about this with.

She bets people still think they’re fucking though.

Fine, kinda embarrassing, but a lesser evil.

*

“So,” she says one day when they're smoking in his car, “Steve Harrington.”

“What about him,” Billy grunts, fiddling with the radion. Some old Cindy Lauper song is playing and he looks two notes away from murdering someone.

“Heard you had some big fight last year,” she offers, studying the way his shoulders go tense and he grimaces. “What was that all about?”

“Was looking for my sister, found her in some creepy house in the middle of fucking nowhere with a bunch of boys and Harrington,” he shrugs like it's not a big deal, even though Robin can clearly see it's kind of a big fucking deal. “No one was saying shit, and man, I had *told* her hanging around Sinclair was gonna be a fucking problem but she never fucking listens.”

“And why is that?” She asks sharply.

“My dad,” he says simply, eyeing the way she got her hackles raised, before continuing with a sigh. “I kinda lost it that day. Some shit had gone down before—”

“You took it out on them?”

“Yeah, and Harrington punched me real good so I broke a plate over his head, didn't stop until Max stuck some needle on my neck.”

Billy says all of this and watches Robin like he's half expecting her to storm out of his car, or some shit like that, but. Well. It's been what— three months since they've started hanging out? She knows— she knows when Billy says *some shit went down* he means the source of the bruises he's always hiding, and yeah, that doesn't excuse him *at all*, but it shines enough of a light for Robin to be willing to grant him a second chance.

If she's being honest, he *is* being less of an asshole than she remembers last year.

"Dude, that's messed up," she tells him, blowing smoke out of the window, "have you apologized yet?"

"It's not like it's gonna make any difference," Billy says, again like it's not a big deal, but the way he punches his *Metallica* tape in is very telling, "so why the fuck bother."

Robin gives him a *look*. "Uh, because we *just* agreed that was messed up?" She shrugs, "if you're gonna say sorry just to get something in return, you're not really sorry, you know?"

"So *that's* why the fuck I should bother?" He asks, eyebrows raised and a wry smile.

"Dunno, dude," Robin stubs her cigarette, "you do you, I'm not gonna like, force you to do anything. Just thought I'd get your side of the story."

"So if I don't say shit to them," Billy speaks slowly, "you're not gonna get on my case about it?"

She shrugs again. "I think last year was a long time ago and I think you're sorry about it. Are you gonna do that again?"

Billy pauses, looks out the windshield. "I don't know," then, "I'm trying not to."

"That's good enough for me," Robin flicks his cigarette out the window, grins, "now, are we gonna get some fries or what?"

"You just wanna make googly eyes at the Thompson girl while she takes our order," Billy snorts, but peels off the school parking lot while on the radio, James Hetfield sings about

puppets and strings.

*

They don't talk about Billy's bruises but he knows that she knows in the same way they don't talk about the mornings Robin can't look anyone in the eyes, some very strong choices of words ringing in her head. Shitty parents are abounding and they just have two very different flavors of shitty.

*

A week after his graduation, they meet in a diner. Not Tammy's diner, one less frequented by the people they went to school with and he starts with:

"Talked with all the shitheads."

Robin raised her eyebrows. "Yeah? How did it go?"

"Apparently I'm on probation now," he quirks a smile, playing with a packet of sugar, "the one with the curly hair, you know? Yelled a lot, fucking hell. He and Max are going to leave me deaf at this rate."

"That's cool, man," she smiles, patting his hand in support, "what about Harrington?"

He— *oh my god*, he goes kinda red in the face, it's amazing. "Talked with him, too. We're— a truce or some shit. Whatever any of that means."

"Hey, did you mean, your apology?"

Billy makes an irritated encompassing gesture of *obviously*.

“Then, fuck, dude, that’s it,” she waits for a beat before adding innocently, “of course, if you’re gonna, like, *woo* him or something—”

“Fuck off, shitbird,” he snaps, scowling, but that stopped sounding like a curse a long time ago, and Robin likes to think it’s at least half fond now. It’s the only reason why she tolerates it.

“Just saying, asshole,” and besides, that too, is kinda fond on her part.

Billy rolls his eyes, leaning back, more comfortable now that they’ve got that confession out of the way. “You say a lot of shit. How’s job hunting going?”

Robin perks up. “I’ve got a job,” she singsongs, “it’s at that new Starcourt thing, at the Ice Cream place, but hey, it’s money.”

“Damn, that was fast, we gotta celebrate,” he grins, flagging the waitress, “hey, can we get two cokes here?”

“A chocolate milkshake.”

“And a chocolate milkshake, please?” He amends and smiles all charming at the girl.

Robin rolls her eyes and laughs when he turns to her and makes a face. Outside, the wind is picking up and everything is colorful for the change in season; summer is just starting, but something is already changing in Hawkins, Indiana.

*

Working with Steve Harrington is funnier than Robin expected.

Like, she never spoke with the guy after that day he cornered in the hallway and yeah, she had been aware of the number of children that was always following around, but *man*, she did not expect him to suck so much at picking up girls outside the school.

The *YOU SUCK* tally is only growing and teasing him is a large part of makes working there survivable. If it were anyone else, she thinks she might have quit a while ago.

Because sure, she resents him a little for the whole Tammy thing, but she has to admit that the guy is funny and genuinely *nice*. The kind that walks her to her car if they're closing late and expects nothing in return. It's like now that school is over, Harrington became a real person.

Or maybe, that change happened earlier and she's only noticing it now, but either way, Robin thinks as she snickers at his terrible pick-up lines, by the time summer ends, she just might have to consider him a friend.

*

"I think you should come by the pool sometime," Billy says one day when they're eating at the food court before Robin's shift.

"Why's that?" She speaks through a mouthful of burger.

"Besides the heatwave?"

"Yeah, besides that."

Billy grins his shark grin. "I think you should meet someone."

Robin chokes on her burger, doubling in a coughing fit. “Oh, hell no. You’re not playing matchmaker, asshole.”

“I’m just saying,” he throws a fry and it bounces off her forehead, falls on her plate, “you and Heather would get along real good.”

“That sounds like you’re playing matchmaker,” she glares, throwing his fry right back. “Why don’t you come by Scoops, then?”

“Fuck off,” he says without any real heat, “don’t fucking come, then. *I’m just saying.*”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you,” Robin grumbles, checking her clock, “I gotta go. My car’s still at the shop, you’re gonna pick me up after my shift, right?”

Without waiting for his answer, she takes off, laughing, and hears his voice yelling after her, “*not your fucking driver, shitbird!*”

*

Billy’s not always on time, but he never takes this fucking long, especially when he knows she’s gonna be closing the shop, so Robin thinks she has a right to be mildly worried.

“You, uh, you sure, he’s coming?” Steve asks, sitting with her in the parking lot while the cars slowly file out. “Because I can, like, give you a ride, you know.”

“Nah, it’s fine. He’s probably messing with his hair. I swear, he’s worst than you,” she snorts, snickering at his offended face, and tries not to be so jittery.

“I don’t even spend—”

Steve's cut off by the Camaro's loud engine, and Robin watches delighted as he nods at Billy in acknowledgment, no weird tension between them. Maybe this whole *probation* thing Max and the kids have going is working after all.

"Hey, you're late, asshole," she glares at him half-heartedly, buckling up, then scrunches up her nose at the strong whiff of cologne that suffocates the car. "Jesus Christ, dude, roll down the window, are you trying to kill me?"

Billy only grunts and that's when she notices how dressed up he is. Well, dressed up for his standards, anyway, and his fingers are drumming restlessly in the steering wheel, his whole body tense, coiled tight, ready to snap.

"Are you alright?" She frowns, eyeing his face for any signs of new bruises.

"Got a date after I drop you off," he says, voice tight. Not a good sign. This isn't first date jitters.

Robin raises her eyebrow. "With who?"

"Now that's none of your fucking business, is it?" Billy snaps, and he's never been this harsh with her, not even months ago when she had been stranded in the high school parking lot and he had been looking for his sister.

"Fine, don't tell me, then, *dickwad*. Sorry for fucking caring," she scowls, crossing her arms over her chest and turning away from him to stare out the window.

She hears him sigh, can bet he's running a hand through his hair. "Sorry, okay? I didn't mean to— it's with Mrs. Wheeler, alright? We're meeting at that motel outside town."

What the fuck.

Okay, Robin's heard *plenty* of stupid ideas over the course of this weird friendship of theirs, but this, this one, it takes the fucking cake. Jesus Christ. She doesn't even know where to start.

"I— *Billy*, I don't even— *what the fuck, dude?*"

Now, she sees him huff, having the *audacity* to look offended. "See? This is why I didn't want to fucking tell you, now you're gonna go up in your goddamn high horse—"

"*High horse? Excuse me?* You're going to fuck a married woman when you're not even attracted to women, and you wanna be mad at *me?*"

"Shut the fuck up," he warns, and his fingers are white in the steering wheel, a dark cloud over his face, "you don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"No, you're right, I don't," she snaps, pinching the bridge of her nose, "because I can't think of one fucking reason why this is a good idea."

Billy says nothing, staring resolutely ahead and turning up the volume on the radio. At this speed, they should've arrived at her place already, so she thinks the fact they haven't might mean something.

"And even if— even disregarding all *that*, you really think *Mrs. Wheeler's* gonna show? Really? She has like, three kids, she's *Nancy's mom*. Have you met Nancy? Do you think *Nancy's* mom is going to have some torrid affair at a dingy motel down the road?"

"What do you want me to say?" He asks, real quiet, like he's tired and all this screaming they're both doing are deflating him like a balloon.

Robin sighs. "That you're not gonna do something real stupid."

“Can’t promise that,” Billy shoots back, immediately, pulling out in front of Robin’s house. It’s dark out already, and the moon is illuminating the car’s interior. It makes him look pale, sickly. Scared. Robin tentatively covers his hand on the gear shift. She can understand being scared.

“I know fucking Mrs. Wheeler would get people off your back,” she says quietly, gentle, “but Billy, this isn’t good for you. I know there’s a lot of shit going on, but remember what we talked about? A place after I graduate? Maybe sooner? Just– don’t make it harder on yourself, okay? This whole thing is stupid as shit. Don’t be stupid, asshole. See you tomorrow?”

Billy stares at his hands. “I’ll pick you up, freeloader.”

This time, it’s Robin that waits at the sidewalk until Billy’s blue Camaro turns a corner and disappears from sight.

*

Something bad happens that night, not that Robin would know as she sleeps fitfully through the night. Like all Hawkins residents, she dreams of fire and black smoke, something wailing in the distance.

*

“You’re late again,” she says as soon as she enters the Camaro, but her voice is cautious and she eyes him like anything about his appearance would tell her what happened last night.

Billy sighs, sunglasses firmly on top of his nose. “I chickened out if that’s what you’re fucking fishing for.”

Robin *beams*. “I knew you weren’t just a dumb blonde!”

“Shut the fuck up, Christ,” he grumbles, and *oh*.

“Are you hangover right now?” She says. *Loudly*. Grinning at his flinch.

“Yeah, I went home and got shitfaced,” he snaps halfheartedly, “why, you gonna lecture me on that too?”

Robin shrugs, sniffs all haughty. “Why, I just might,” laughs, “it’s healthier than the other option, I think. Still, getting drunk alone is no fun.”

“Your face is no fun,” he flicks his cigarette at her, dropping ashes on her jeans. “Now get the fuck out of my car.”

Starcourt mall is packed as Robin walks in laughing in her relief and the sound of tires screeching can be heard from the parking lot.

In a few hours, Dustin is going to barge in with news of a Russian conspiracy. In a few hours, she’s going to overhear them and demand in on it, but instead of dealing with this alone, she’s gonna make a phone call to Hawkins’ Public Pool.

“Hi, I was wondering if I could speak with Billy Hargrove? He’s a lifeguard. What? No, I’m not– I swear! It’s uh, family matters. Yeah, I’m his sister. Sure, I can hold.”

during I: we're halfway there

Chapter Summary

Russian spies are lurking in Hawkins, the ice cream parlor is America's heroes base of operations.

Chapter Notes

okay, so. This was getting too long, so I decided to break this chapter in two. This is the first part. I struggled a little writing this, as I wasn't sure how to rewrite season 3 without this getting boring and dragging, but i decided to focus more on Robin's POV and filling in the blanks from what we've seen on the show-- please, do let me know what you guys think!

Hawkins, Indiana is a small town in a small county in a big, big country in an even larger world. It's a blip on the map, really; it could disappear overnight and no one would notice.

Robin used to feel Hawkins pressing down on her, shrinking around her like walls in a trash compactor, and that sign on the road— *you are now leaving Hawkins!* – had always read like a lie— there's no leaving Hawkins.

Now, suddenly, there's apparently an entire Russian conspiracy festering underneath the town? Like, *holy shit*. It's like the world just opened up and suddenly Hawkins is a completely different town than she knew.

“Bullshit,” Billy says for the tenth time and Steve holds Dustin back from lunging across the table. Robin groans, leaning back on her chair so far she can see the board with all the Russian letters. “What? Look me in the eye and tell me this doesn’t sound fuckin’ insane, I dare you.”

Steve takes a deep, deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I know how it sounds, Hargrove, but,” he spreads his arms, nearly hitting Dustin in the face; somehow that doesn't chip at the kid's adoration. “Guess what? You don't have to be here! No one's asking you to stay!”

“She is!” Billy points at her and *oh, great*, now they're dragging her into this. “She called me at the pool and now everyone thinks my grandmother is dyin'. So, apparently, I'm stuck here. Right, sis?”

Robin groans again, sliding on her chair like she's melting. Steve gives her a wounded look while Billy smirks over it. Dustin tries to kick someone under the table and ends up hitting his knee.

“Guys, *GUY*S, can we focus?” Dustin snaps, waving that recorder around on their faces. “We gotta translate this– the future of the town, no, the country, no,” he pauses probably for dramatic effect, “*THE WORLD*. So, and I'm not thrilled about it either, but we've *all* got to work together and do this.”

The bell rings at the counter and Robin snaps back down, glaring at Steve. “Dude, you're supposed to be slinging ice cream!”

“We had important shit to discuss,” he scowls, but drags himself up, sighing dramatically, “fine, *fine*. I'LL BE RIGHT THERE,” he adds way louder than necessary for whoever's laying it on the bell.

As Steve leaves with heavy feet, Robin focus back on the two other boys left to work with her; Billy is trying to flick Dustin's cap off, but the kid keeps batting his hand away.

Awesome. Real spy material right there.

*

They've been at this for a good couple hours and Robin thinks it says something about her life that this is the most exciting stuff that happened all summer, but it's been *hours* and at the very least, the recording is starting to sound less alien, maybe—

“Wait, that last part— play it again,” she gestures for Dustin to rewind the tape, closing her eyes as she paces, trying to piece together the random sounds into something vaguely phonetic. “Okay, that word, um...” the wheels are clicking on her head and she knows she's waving her arms a lot, but shit is starting to slide into place, so fuck it, “it's pronounced... *dly-nna-ya*.”

Dustin sits up a bit, smiling with the excitement of *finally* going somewhere, and beside him, Billy looks up from where he had been lying face down on the table and possibly dozing off.

“Dly-nna-ya, which is spelled,” Robin snaps her fingers, pointing at the board, and Dustin scrambles for it, muttering letters under his breath while Robin dives for their notepad and tosses Billy the dictionary; he's always been better than any of them at that book shit.

“The, the chair-looking thing,” Dustin calls, positively beaming already.

“Yeah, okay,” she scribbles it all down as the kid figures out the weird-looking letters and shows it to Billy to look for the word.

Holy shit, they're on *fire*! Even Billy who had been hesitant to believe this is anything more than gibberish is beginning to get into it, too curious to keep up his uncaring douchebag routine as he flips through the Russian-English dictionary and barks the translations.

“Is this it?” Dustin pauses, looking at them with large awed eyes, “did we just translate a whole freaking sentence?”

“Son of a bitch,” Billy mutters, setting down the dictionary and eyeing the recorder, “he actually picked up the fuckin' Russians.”

Robin grins, spinning to throw the window partition open. “We’ve got our first sentence,” she tells Steve, totally not with a smug face on.

He crowds closer, two ice cream cones on his hands, “oh, seriously?”

“Yeah,” she puts on her best Russian accent, “*the week is long.*”

His face falls. “Well, that’s thrilling.”

“I know,” she sighs, shrugs, still hopeful, “but, *progress*,” flashes him a smile before sliding the window shut again, the tail end of his customer tirade fading out.

“Okay, where were we?”

*

Sometimes, Robin thinks she might be a freaking genius.

Like, right now. She got the message. *She got the message!* The Russians were dumb enough to display their conspiracy shit on open channels and now Robin freaking translated it.

“*The week is long, the silver cat feeds when blue meets yellow in the West,*” they all chorus, reading off her board, and for one fleeting second she thinks this sounds an awful lot like a cult situation.

Okay, so translating was just the first step, so what? Nobody said this was gonna be easy.

“I mean, it just,” Steve huffs as they lock up the shop, “it just can’t be right.”

“It’s right,” Robin cuts in, rolling her eyes.

“Honestly,” Dustin shrugs, “I think it’s great news.”

“Of course *you* would,” Billy snickers, earning a slap on his shoulder from Robin.

“How is this great news?” Steve ignores him, chuckles, “I mean, so much for being America’s heroes, it’s total nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Dustin argues at the same time that Billy snorts obnoxiously, and pauses, whirling on him, kinda startled, “wait, *you* agree with me?”

Billy doesn’t seem to appreciate having the attention turned on him, shoves his hands in his pockets, “what? I don’t *agree* with shit, I just think it’s too fuckin’ specific.”

“Right!” Dustin grins, excited, walking backward so that he can keep grinning at Billy and Robin bites back her laughter at his disgruntled expression, “it’s gotta be some sort of code!”

“What do you mean, a *code*?” Steve asks, frowning as if *that* would be too far-fetched.

“Like a super-secret spy-code,” the kid spreads his arms with a *duh* face on.

Steve scoffs, “that’s a total stretch.”

“I don’t know,” Robin shrugs. Just like, yesterday she’d say some sort of Russian conspiracy would be not even a total stretch, but a full-on looney bin sort of delusion. Because, let’s be serious, it’s *Hawkins*, nothing exciting happens in Hawkins, let alone action-movie flavors of dangerous. “Is it?”

“You’re buying into this?” Steve raises his eyebrows, disbelieving, then looks at Billy, “you’re *both* buying into this?”

Billy shrugs too, lights up a cigarette. “Dunno, man, didn’t that lab outside town use to do fucked up shit ‘round here, too?”

Dustin gives Steve a *see?* look.

“Okay, listen,” Robin intervenes, speaking as placating as she can without sounding too condescending, “just for kicks, let’s entertain the possibility that it is a secret Russian transmission. What’d you think they were gonna say? *Fire the warhead at noon?*”

“Exactly,” Dustin nods sagely.

“And my translation is correct,” she adds, “I know that for sure, so... *the silver cat feeds*, why would anyone talk like that unless they’re trying to mask the meaning of their message?”

“*Exactly!*”

“And why would anyone mask the true meaning of their message unless the message was somehow sensitive?” *Oh, shit*, they’re actually uncovering some secret conspiracy, aren’t they? *Holy shit*, okay.

“*Exactly!*”

Robin glances at Dustin, “so I guess that confirms your suspicion.”

“Evil Russians,” he agrees.

“I can’t believe I’m about to agree with this strange child, but,” she turns back to Steve and Billy, snickering at herself, more in disbelief at the whole situation, “yeah, totally evil Russians!”

Dustin is the only one still fired up, apparently not even a little bit tired after a whole day of translating, as he ignores the other two slackers falling behind, “so how do we crack it?”

“Well, I guess we translate the rest and hopefully a pattern emerges.”

“A pattern. Right, like maybe *silver cat* is a meeting place?”

“Or a person.”

“Or a weapon!”

“It’s probably gonna take a super genius to crack it, but,” she pauses, finally noticing the lack of comments from the peanut gallery, “where’re Steve and Billy?”

She turns around, ready to call them because what the fuck are they doing with the rocking horse? Steve is rooting through his pockets, coins clattering to the floor, the sound echoing eerily on the empty shopping, and Billy is waiting nearby looking amused, arms crossed with no intention of helping.

“Hey, Steve?” She calls, sighing tiredly, “what are you doing?”

“Uh, it’s a quarter, I need– does anyone have a quarter?” he explains distractedly, turning to Billy, “do you have a quarter?”

Robin exchanges a look with Dustin before jogging back. “Sure you’re tall enough for that ride?”

And by now, Steve is kind of losing his shit, so Billy tosses him the coin. “That gonna work, pretty boy?”

“Shut up,” he snaps, fumbling with the machine. Still crouching, he licks his lips as the horse starts bobbing and carnival music plays from the speakers.

“You need help getting up, Stevie—”

He shushes them, one finger up, and stares at the horse with a scary amount of concentration from the guy that never seems to be able to stay still. Billy sidles up to her, checking his watch worriedly, and Robin thinks they should be wrapping this up soon, but Steve is still looking catatonic there telling them to *shut up and listen*—

“Holy shit,” Dustin bursts out, and Steve looks up. They share some freaky silent conversation where Steve is getting excited now too and Dustin is muttering about *music* and looking through his backpack, playing the tape again.

Robin frowns, “I don’t understand—”

“It’s the exact same song in the recording,” Dustin tells her, and okay, that’s— that’s really not good.

“Maybe they have horses like this in Russia,” she tries weakly, and beside her, Billy shakes his head.

“Really? That’s what you’re going with?”

“*Indiana Flyer*? I don’t,” Steve sounds a bit freaked out, too, like it’s finally sinking in that this has just become way too real, “I don’t think so. This code, it didn’t come from Russia,” he finally looks up at all of them, wide-eyed and grim, “it came from here.”

“*Fuck*,” Billy says, and the music plays on while they all take a minute to truly register what this means. When Dustin first started with the Russian shit, Robin, *all of them*, had been picturing a giant military base, rusty and bare, somewhere far from America, buried deep in the European tundra, and not—

Not right there, in their sleepy town in the middle of nowhere.

*

That night, Robin dreams of strange words in Russian and a great shadow swallowing all of Hawkins up, turning the world inside out and upside down.

*

“When’s your car fucking leaving the shop?”

Robin yawns, resting her head on the window as Hawkins go by them, people going about their business, the whole town coming to life in the late morning, blissfully unaware of the whole freaking Russian operation lurking in the shadows. “About two days, maybe, I don’t know.”

“Christ,” Billy mutters, chewing on his cigarette. His whole body is tense and he looks like he didn’t get much sleep last night either, most likely stayed up trying to make sense of yesterday. Robin can relate. It’s like there’s two Hawkins now— one they know, with dusty streets and syrupy days and sleepy people, and this new, strange Hawkins, where Russian conspiracies are a thing and children go around with long-distance radios picking up secret communication. And it’s just— those two don’t fit, no matter how you try to stack one on top of the other, the edges spill out, unmatched.

It's the kind of shit that scrambles your brain in the beginning, until you say *fuck it*, and just rolls with it. Cross the motherfucking town line and *welcome, you are now in New Hawkins where shit might jump at you from the shadows, please enjoy your stay*.

"You working today?" She says, fiddling with the headphones she's bringing from home. It feels weird to think of *work* now that they know there's something *more* happening right under their noses, but Billy nods, stiff, and *oh, right*. They still have their own screwed up shit to worry about, nevermind conspiracies.

Maybe her face falls a little despite the fact that whatever, you know, it's fine, it's not like she cares, because Billy is tapping his fingers on the steering wheel when he glances at her, almost apologetic. "But I'm gonna ask for tomorrow off so we can sort out this Russian shit."

"Cool," Robin nods, smiles, feeling just a tad bit relieved. There's safety in numbers and the more people are working on this, the faster they're gonna crack this code. "I'm gonna try and see if I can make any more progress in the translation before working on cracking it."

Billy snorts, not bothering to hide his snickers. "How the fuck is this our lives? Shit, man, secret fuckin' codes."

"I mean, it beats talking about the town gossip," she laughs, slouching more comfortably in her seat before giving him a sly glance, "and 'sides, you get to hang out with *Steve*," she singsongs, cackling at his scowl.

"Shut it, shitbird," he glares, making a left sharper than necessary as he parks haphazardly in the mall's parking lot. Robin is still laughing her ass off at his face, stumbling out the car, when Billy calls her back, leaning down to fix her with a serious look, "and hey, don't be stupid. You gotta be careful with that spy shit."

Robin coos. "You *do* care!"

Billy swears up a storm at her, tearing out of the parking lot with all the theatrics and drama that she knows he secretly revels in, but still, Robin shakes her head, grinning, and pushes the doors open.

*

“Ahoy, sailor boy and his toddler,” she greets them, slipping into the break room. Steve and Dustin are already camped out there, their shit spread all over the table, and if Robin hadn’t been there where they closed the shop last night, she’d swear they spent the night inside. “Don’t you all look busy.”

“The clock is ticking, Robin,” Dustin tells her passionately, gesturing everything, “it’s ticking! We don’t have time to sleep in!”

“I’m literally half an hour earlier,” she points out, dropping her bag by the table and kicking it lightly, “and Steve’s napping.”

“ ‘m awake!” scrambles said boy, snapping his head up, “what’s going on? Oh, hey, Robin.”

Dustin makes an affronted noise. “Ticking clock, people! We still gotta translate like, half the message and who knows how many Russians are just *prowling* outside— *prowling*.”

The kid does have a point. The Russians could be all over the mall, just waiting to pick up on their little operation here, and like, they do need some hard evidence to pin this to the police or there’s no way they’ll believe in this shit. “Well, why don’t you guys go spy them right back? You’ve clearly got the tools.”

And by that, she means the one lone binoculars she can see peeking out of the kid’s backpack, but both him and Steve perk up at that. “Oh, shit, you’re right,” Dustin says, already picking up said binoculars, and slapping Steve in the shoulders, “dude, we gotta go see if we can find them, maybe check their hideout.”

“Really, *really*, Dustin,” Steve has his hands on his hips now, talking to the kid like a real mom, “you think it’s gonna be that easy? That they’re gonna go around with like, red flags and shit? Maybe a giant sign flashing their location?”

“No,” Robin tells him patiently, unrolling the cables of her headphones, “but maybe if you bozos can spot one of ‘em, you could follow him all the way back to their headquarters.”

Steve pauses, considering her words. Then, “yeah, that tracks,” he nods, bobbing his head along, “okay, that’s actually a smart idea. We can hide in the bushes, you know, in front of the, uh, the GAP, there’s a clear view of pretty much everywhere from there.”

“Awesome,” Dustin crows, and hands the recorder over to Robin, “you stay here and keep translating the other half.”

Robin takes it, biting back an amused smile as the kid bosses her around like that wasn’t her plan all along. God, finally some peace and quiet to work on this. Well, at least Steve already opened the store for her.

The notepad is right where she left last night and she plugs in her headphones, playing it over and over in between customers, dictionary right by her side. It’s gritty work, deciphering the sounds and associating that to the weird alphabet and *then* looking for the translation, hoping it makes any sort of sense in English. Honestly, an okay grammar is all she’s looking for right now. She’ll worry about the context later.

And while working alone is a bitch, and it kinda makes her want to never talk with people again, but it sure is a productive morning, because it bleeds into the afternoon with her scribbling away at the notepad, and by that time the annoying Sinclair girl comes by, she thinks she has the whole thing ready.

The week is long, the silver cat feeds when blue meets yellow in the West. A trip to China sounds nice if you thread lightly.

It doesn’t make a whole lotta sense right now, but come on. It’s a secret code, what did they expect? It was never gonna be easy. *Silver cat, the silver cat—*

Someone knocks on the door, the back door and she sighs, sliding over to the backroom to sign in the deliveries. It's the same mustached man as always and Robin smiles awkwardly as she takes the planchet from him distractedly, the code still rattling on her brain, but–

His cap– *Lynx Transportations*– catches her eye and it suddenly slides into place with surprising clarity.

Silver cat– holy shit, okay, *okay*, so, Lynx Transportations is clearly silver cat, so that probably means the rest of the code is here, in the mal! *Holy crap!*

She's a freaking genius!

Robin runs out of the parlor, brushing past Steve and Dustin as they argue about some shenanigan shit, too hyped up to pay attention to whatever drama is going on there, she's on *fire* right now. Okay, okay, so. *A trip to China sounds nice*. To *China*, okay, there's gotta be something Chinese here, she's sure she saw some dragon shit before, and– *jackpot*. Imperial Panda, *a trip to China sounds nice*. Now, the other part, what was it– *if you thread lightly*– Kaufman shoes, of course!

Holy shit, she's really doing this!

When blue meets yellow in the West– the clock! The hands are blue and yellow, it's the motherfucking time of the meeting!

“Robin?”

Steve's voice snaps her back to reality and Robin grins, barely registering his and Dustin's confused expressions. “I did it,” she laughs, not quite believing it herself, “I cracked it!”

“You cracked what?”

Robin hops down from the bench, grins even wider, excitement bubbling inside her like a volcano. “I cracked the code.”

*

“So,” Steve says, dropping beside her in the curb. Dustin is long gone by now and they have finally chased away the last of the customers to close the shop. “You cracked the code, uh?”

Robin shrugs, not bothering to hide her pride. “Yup. You followed any Russians?”

“Nah,” he chuckles, taking his hat off to run a hand through his hair. There’s something tired about it and Robin wonders briefly why he’s here waiting with her when he could’ve gone home already. “Apparently the Russians are good at hiding. Your day was definitely more exciting— I mean, you cracked a super-secret code, how rad is that?”

“It’s pretty rad, yeah,” she laughs, knocking shoulders with him, “but we’re only halfway there. We gotta figure out where they’re hiding and *what* they’re hiding.”

Steve stretches his legs in front of him, yawns again; his smile is sloppy, even if something seems to be catching behind it. “Hey, just take the damn win, okay? Trust me, *this* is going surprisingly well.” He pauses, eyes scanning the street, and she shrugs, waiting for him to spit it out whatever it is that he clearly wants to ask. And hey, it only takes him like, another five million hours to do it. “So, okay, random question— which, by the way, I think is very justified considering past events, okay? So just go along with me here—”

“Just ask what you wanna ask, dingus.”

“Are you and Billy, like, a thing? It’s just ‘cause I’ve never seen him hang around a girl so long and you know, people used to talk in school and yesterday he came all the way here to help you and shit, so. Are you?”

It sounds like he said all of that in one breath, which, *impressive*, but also, *gross*. Robin bites back a grimace, telling herself it *is* a fair question considering Steve doesn't have all of the facts, and turns her head to look at him. "Nah, dude, we're just friends. Why?"

Steve seems to consider this, mulling over her words, and shrugs, the picture-perfect of fake nonchalance. "Nothing, just wondering. He's... different from last November. Less douche."

That gets him a snort and Robin shakes her head, still snickering. "Yeah, I'll bet. He's trying to do better. Heard he even apologized, right?"

Now, his eyes go all saucer-wide. "He did! It was so weird. Like, I don't know. He apologized to the kids, too. And it's— he sounded so earnest, I guess I actually believed him. Is that weird?"

Robin clicks her tongue, thinks about it. "Dunno. Does it matter?"

Steve picks at his socks. "No, I don't think so."

"Anyway, that's good— that you don't, you know, hate his guts and all anymore," she says cautiously, "because he said he was gonna be here tomorrow to help us figure shit out."

"Are you— seriously? I mean, that's cool, I guess. He's smart and shit, isn't he?" Steve sighs, running his hand through his hair again; it's starting to stick up everywhere, "tell him to stop being such an asshole, though."

The telltale sounds of the Camaro roar as Billy turns the corner and Robin stands up, dusts herself off. She gives Steve a look. "Tell him that yourself, dingus, I'm not your carrier pigeon."

Steve laughs as he gets to his feet too, and when she collapses on the passenger seat, he leans on the window to grin at Billy. "Heard you're playing spy with us tomorrow, Hargrove."

“Is that so?” Billy spares barely a second to glare at Robin and she bites back a laugh, watches him inevitably go back to looking at Steve. After all, Billy has always been exceptionally bad at not looking at Steve. “But you heard right. Got the day off tomorrow and Max is hanging out with some weird girl, so I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“No parties to hit?” Steve raises his eyebrows, “what, you tired of being King yet?”

Oh god, not this bullshit again, Robin groans internally, slouching on her seat. Sometimes, she decides, boys are too stupid for her to handle.

“Didn’t say that, pretty boy,” Billy grins sharply, starting the car, “plenty of invitations around, they just don’t measure up to you.”

He drives away before Steve can say anything else, and Robin makes a face at him, clapping. “Damn, you’re really going for it?”

“Shut up,” he growls, turning up the radio.

“I’m just saying—”

“Yeah, yeah, like I said, you say a lot of shit.”

“*I’m just saying it,* he was asking about you today. And he waited around until you showed up,” she points out.

“Christ, just shut it, shitbird,” he scowls, and Robin shakes her head, rolling down the window and letting the wind carry her laughter away.

They're all sitting around the small table in the break room and their boss would absolutely kill her and Steve if he knew they're letting the counter unmanned, except for Dustin, who's pacing back and forth as he tells them all about his little early morning adventure.

Steve is spinning his hat on his hands absently, seemingly deep in thought– which is worrying, in her humble opinion– and Billy is drumming his fingers on the table, absolutely not helping on diffusing the tension– she thinks she's this close of snapping his fingers if the *tap-tap-tap-tap* doesn't stop soon.

“Well, you know,” Steve finally says, snatching and smoothing out his stupid white sailor hat, and leaning closer, all dramatic. “I can take him out.”

“Take who out?”

“The Russian guard. What?” He asks, apparently confused at their different degrees of disbelief, “I sneak up behind him, I knock him out, and I take his keycard. It's easy.”

Billy scoffs loudly while Dustin rolls his eyes. “Did you not hear the part about the massive gun?”

Steve huffs, “yes, Dustin, I did. And that's why I would be sneaking.”

“No, that's why I'll be the one doin' it,” Billy says with an air of finality and Steve makes a disparaging sound that probably means he's about to go on a very long rant.

“The fuck you are, Hargrove. This requires *subtlety*, do you even know what that is? You're like the least subtle person here, okay, so, it's gotta be me. I go in, whack him on the back of his head, get the keycard– *stealth mode*. ”

“Ah, please, tell me this, and be honest,” Dustin interrupts them, narrowing his eyes, “have you actually won a fight?”

“Oh, come on,” Billy mutters, fidgeting uncomfortably in his chair and averting his eyes to the tiled floor.

“Seriously? Are you guys serious right now? That was one time—”

“Twice. Jonathan, year prior?”

“Wait, that creep beat you up?”

“Listen that doesn’t count—”

“Why wouldn’t it? Because it looks like he beat the shit out of you—”

“What the fuck, Harrington?”

At this point, Robin tunes them out, more worried about figuring out a way into that room without anyone getting shot or captured. She thinks about what Dustin said, about the room and the keycard, and when she looks up, the answer is there, right in front of her.

That just might work.

She stands up abruptly, ignoring the boys’ dumb questions and rushing out to the front to take all the money from the tip jar, only turning around to throw Billy his keys. “Come on, asshole, you’re driving me.”

“The hell I am,” he argues, but starts putting on his jacket anyway, “what’s wrong with you?”

“Yeah, and hey, half of that is mine—” Steve complains, poking out of the break room with Dustin.

But Robin has half of a plan already growing on her mind and it’s like yesterday when she was breaking down the code— she’s too hyped up, too fired up, just *too much*, to stop. “Don’t have time to explain it all now,” she tells them, and adds for good measure, “just hold down the fort, sling some ice cream, and don’t get beaten up!”

Faintly, she hears Steve and Dustin whining, but she ignores them, dragging Billy by the arm, uncomfortably aware of the ticking clock in the mall, blue and yellow just *dying* to meet in the West. “Okay,” she says once they’re in his car, pulling out of the parking lot, “do you know how to get to the County’s Records Office?”

*

“Starcourt Mall,” she says, slamming the papers on the table, “the complete blueprint.”

Dustin whistles, impressed. “Not bad.”

She flashes him a grin, then points at the map, “so, this is us, Scoops, and this,” she shows them a dot all the way across them, “is where we want to go.”

“I mean, I don’t really see a way in,” Steve points out, studying the ins and outs of the mall.

This is her moment, the big reveal of her plan, the *stroke of genius*. “There’s not if you’re talking exclusively about doors,” she gives a brief pause for dramatic effects— come on, she’s around Billy *and* Steve all day, they’re drama queen bullshit is starting to rub off on her, okay? – and rips off the first paper, revealing the blueprints with that includes the air ducts.

Dustin, again, is slack-jawed at her superiors thinking. “Air ducts!”

“Exactly! Turns out this secret room needs air just like any old room. And these air ducts,” she quickly grabs a marker to circle it in red ink, “lead all the way to here.”

Billy, who had already heard her plan once in the car, nods at Dustin. “Think you can fit in there, squirt?”

“Dude, of course,” the kid scoffs, all offended, but he’s too excited to hold a grudge, “oh, my god, this could actually work! And Steve doesn’t have to get shot by the Russians!”

“Hey, I wasn’t gonna– you know what, whatever,” Steve scowls, marching to get the stairs they store somewhere around here, “does anyone have a screwdriver?”

Robin grins and grins and *grins*. Things are starting to look up on their end and they could actually have a shot of dismantling some big ass secret Russian conspiracy. Like, what the fuck is this summer?

Instead of boring afternoons and sleepy mornings like literally every other summer of her life, Robin got secret codes and Russian bases, and now here she is, watching Billy steadying the stairs while Steve unscrews the vents for Dustin to climb inside.

“Yeah, I don’t know, man, I don’t know if you can fit in here,” Steve’s telling Dustin, climbing down, “it’s like, super tight.”

“I’ll fit, trust me,” the kid waves off his concern, carefully taking his place in the stairs, “no collarbones, remember? Hey, keep this thing steady, Jesus,” he grumbles at Billy, who had let go for a second to make a face at him.

“Uh, excuse me?” Robin feels the need to ask. That’s just not the kind of shit you can say and then just not explain.

Steve nods, “oh, he uh, yeah, he’s got some disease. Yeah, it’s chry, uh— chrydo something. Yeah, I dunno. He’s missing bones and stuff. He can bend like gumbo.”

Both Billy and Robin raise their eyebrows, “you mean Gumby?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s gumbo.”

“Steve! Shut up and come push me!” Dustin hollers, halfway into the vents, and Steve trades a look with Billy before climbing up the stairs. “Dude, just push me! Stop messing with my legs, just shove me! Push my butt, I don’t care!”

“I’m not messing with your legs, I just have shitty footing,” Steve yells back, and they’re both making a ruckus on the stairs while Billy looks like he’s very close of just shoving them both down the vent and the stair is *swaying*—

In the counter, someone rings the bell and Erica Sinclair’s voice floats from the front, the same arrogant tone she keeps shooting at Robin.

For like, the third time in two days, Robin has a brilliant idea.

*

Erica might also have a point with the whole child endangerment thing, but hey, she’s getting free ice cream for *life* out of this. Robin can admit this is a half-assed plan, but it’s better than watching Steve and Dustin scream at each other, and besides, the girl is pretty good at sneaking up on those soldiers.

*

“That’s definitely not Chinese food,” Steve says as they all stare down at the metal box. Beside Robin, Billy swears, sounding pretty freaked out too. “Uh, maybe you guys should,

you know, stand back.”

Yeah, right, they’ve got kids here and Robin isn’t too keen on being blown up either, so she takes Erica and steps back, away from the weird boxes, while Steve and Dustin keep going back and forth with some stupid *if you die, I die* argument.

Billy beats them to it. He reaches down and pulls out a glass tube full of a green liquid inside that looks nothing like she’s ever seen on Earth.

Holy shit, are they hiding aliens in here?

“What the fuck is this?” Billy asks, holding it at arm's length, and before anyone can offer any sort of wisdom, the whole room shakes. “I thought Indiana didn’t get earthquakes?”

Dustin swallows, going wide-eyed. “We don’t.”

At her side, Erica whispers, “*booby traps.*”

You know what, that’s it. “Let’s just grab that and go,” she takes the green shit from Billy and stuffs it on Erica’s stupid *My Little Pony* backpack, distantly aware that Dustin is pressing the buttons *and nothing is happening*.

“Press the button!” Steve is yelling, gesturing wildly, behind the boxes, and Dustin is slamming on the panel frantically, yelling back that *what the fuck do you think I’m doing?* And Billy is pushing the kid away to push at the buttons now but the door is still fucking closed, *oh god*, this is a trap isn’t it? *Shit, shit, shit—*

In the middle of the chaos, there’s a second of perfect calm.

Then— the room *falls*.

during II: livin' on a prayer

Chapter Summary

shit goes down, and all roads lead to Starcourt Mall

Chapter Notes

okay so, here's the last half of the season and oh boy, this is a big one. I'm sorry it took me this long to update, but I wanted to wrap up the season in this chapter. Again, I tried not to stay too much on what we've already seen in the show, so if ever feels too rushed, please let me know!

Anyway, I hope you guys like it! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The whole fucking room is an elevator because of fucking course it is and now they're falling at neck-breaking speed and everyone is yelling but Steve is just losing his shit and Billy and Dustin are competing to see who punches the buttons faster but again, *nothing is fucking happening* and Robin is gonna be the one losing her shit if this keeps—

It stops as suddenly as it had begun moving and inertia jerks them around. Robin groans, watches Billy scramble to help Steve from under a heavy box, asks warily, “Is everyone okay?”

Steve, in a constant state of losing his shit, stomps to the panel, screaming, “yeah, I’m *great* now that I know Russians can’t design elevators!”

“Yeah,” she shoots back, running a hand through her hair and trying to catch her breath, “I think we’ve clearly established that these buttons don’t work!”

“They’re buttons! They have to do *something*!”

“Yeah, no shit, if we had a keycard, maybe!”

Steve pauses for the first time since shit hit the fan. “A what?”

Okay, things are bad, things are freaking *horrifying*, but she’s gotta stay calm. “It’s an electronic lock,” she explains, gesturing the panel, “same as the loading dock door. If we don’t have a keycard, it won’t operate, meaning—”

It’s Dustin that gives the grim reality check. “We’re stuck.”

Erica is the one losing her shit, then. She stands on her tiptoes and starts saying shit about Tina and her Uncle Jack and that sets Steve off again and if no one intervenes they’re gonna be yelling at each other until the Russians come back to shoot them all, execution-style, and Robin is so tired, and she just can’t think with all this noise, and if she didn’t know it would fall on deaf ears, she’d tell Dustin and Billy that there’s no way they’d be able to climb up the elevator cables like they’re clearly thinking of doing.

They’re *stuck*, they’re literally sitting ducks here, waiting for the enemy to come find them. This was so stupid, why did they ever think this was gonna work? Three teenagers and two kids busting a secret base— they were clearly doomed from the start.

“I’m dead,” Billy sits beside her on the floor, boxes at their feet, and pushes his knees against his chest to rest his head down. “If we don’t die in this fuckin’ elevator, my—*fuck*, this is fuckin’ bullshit.”

Robin barks a laugh, wonders if this is her turn to lose her shit, “what, killed by Russians under a mall isn’t how you wanted to go?”

“Somehow,” he snaps, glancing up only long enough to glare at her, “that didn’t cross my mind, no.”

A few feet away, Erica is now rooting through her backpack, plucking down on the floor, and looking like she's ready to nap. *Smart girl*, Robin thinks. She knows they'll be there for a while. Above them, Steve and Dustin are now discussing the logistics of trying to climb up the cables, probably just for the sake of not losing hope.

They're fucked and Robin has no idea how they could get out of this, no crazy plan that just might work, nothing to let them slip out by the skin of their teeth. There's something restless inside her chest, something that recoils at standing still, whispers that not doing anything is giving up and giving up is lying down on their graves, waiting for the Russians to pour the dirt in. It itches and scratches just underneath her skin and she buries her hands on her hair, pulling a bit at the roots. Grounding herself. At the corner of her eyes, she sees Billy get to his feet, kick a box with a twin anxious energy, and Robin feels a bit guilty for dragging him into this.

Not enough to keep herself from scoffing when he starts trying to pry the metal doors open, though. "You seriously think that's gonna work?"

"Better than doing nothin'," he grunts, grimacing at the exertion, and he's going to pull a muscle if he keeps at this.

"He's got a point," Erica nods, apparently satisfied someone is doing something like that's not totally a placebo. "I'm not dying in this dumpster just 'cause you idiots don't know how to operate an elevator."

Billy sneers something but it's lost to the absolute immobility of the doors.

"Come on," the girl sighs all long-suffering from where she's sprawled on the floor, head pillowed by her backpack, "you scared the shit outta my stupid brother last year and you can't even open this one door?"

Erica clicks her tongue, sounding utterly unimpressed and Robin laughs, head hitting the wall, because Billy looks torn between getting offended or maybe guilty, but he still pauses on his useless efforts to look back at her. "I apologized for that," he points a finger in Erica's direction, glaring, and kicks the metal door, "and I don't see you doing jack shit to help, so shut your pie hole."

“I am resting,” she sniffs loftily, “saving my energy— you know, like a smart person? If I have to miss Uncle Jack’s party, it better be for a damn good reason and you bet I’m gonna be alive to see what’s this all about.”

“Jesus Christ,” Billy says, rolling his eyes, and stands there, freaking studying the door or something, like a lever or a new button is just gonna pop up all of a sudden. Or he’s having a stroke, the jury’s still out.

This is going so great.

From the roof, Steve’s frustrated voice floats down along with Dustin’s very loud one, and seconds later, Steve is dropping back into the elevator, huffing and scowling. He looks at Billy, squinting as it slowly dawns on him what Billy had been trying to do, and okay, let’s be real, Robin’s not trying to be like, mean or anything, but if *Billy* couldn’t pry the doors open, there’s no way *Steve*’s gonna do it either.

Of course, that doesn’t stop him from trying.

“What, it’s worth a shot,” he says through his teeth when Billy points it out, and his face goes all red from the effort, tomato red, really, and Billy makes a face, hovering like he thinks Steve might snap in two, “I think— just a bit more— *almost there*— yeah, no, this isn’t happening.”

Steve gives up, panting, and leans on the wall to catch his breath. If she has to stay in this very confined space with two sweaty boys, Robin might legit go on a murder spree.

“Maybe if you both tried at the same time?” Dustin suggests, popping his head upside down from the roof, curls defying gravity— Robin is impressed. “Or, if you had, like, something to use as a lever.”

They both shrug. “Okay, we’ve got no levers so, uh, you take that side and I,” Steve gestures the doors, trailing off a bit helplessly, probably realizing that’s not gonna work either. “Take

this one?"

Billy shrugs again, parrots, "worth a shot."

There's something desperate about doing shit even though you know it's not going to help anything, but Robin still stands up, dusts herself off, and joins Steve at pulling at the metal, nails sliding uselessly in the smooth surface and sneakers skidding on the floor.

They're in for a long night.

*

"There's gotta be something we can do," Steve says, pacing back and forth, and winces at his own voice when Robin glares at him pointedly, gesturing the small children sleeping. "Sorry. I'm just saying, we can't just stand here and wait."

"Pretty sure we did everythin' we could already," Billy drawls, head tilted back as he stares unseeing at the ceiling. He's sitting beside Robin again and the situation must be really dire because he lets her slump against him without anything more than a half-hearted glare. "My Little Pony over there might have a point about resting. Can't kick Russian ass we're dead on our feet."

Steve makes a frustrated sound. "I know, but listen, they have guns," he waves his arms around, flails, "massive guns, we're not kicking Russian ass either way, dude."

"Hate to say it," Robin says, sighing, "but Harrington's right, you know? You don't bring fists to a gunfight."

"Thought that was knives," Billy half asks, disinterested.

“Yeah, but this is even worse!” Steve snaps, throwing his hands up, “how are you not seeing this? We need a plan, Hargrove! A real workable plan. Where no one gets shot, preferably.”

“I like how getting shot is still on the table there,” she raises her eyebrows.

“I’m just being realistic,” he grimaces.

Billy makes a face again. “We shoulda stolen a gun.”

“That is,” Steve makes a face back now, “probably true. My plan– sneaking up on that guard, whacking on him on the head? Totally woulda gotten us a gun.”

“And you getting shot. How is that any better, pretty boy?”

“How is whining on what we could’ve done any better?” Robin groans. It’s past 3 am already, almost 4 in fact, they’re nearly done with the Witching Hour and still no signs of anyone coming for them or any possible exit, it’s getting tiring, all this waiting.

Deflating like a balloon, Steve slides down the wall in front of them, sad expression falling even further. He sighs, dragging a hand across his face and scrubbing at his eyes. Then, when no one says anything, he sighs again, *pointedly*, and Billy throws him a warning look, before, obviously, caving and nudging his foot with his own boot. “Spit it out.”

“ ‘s nothing,” he finally says after an uncomfortably long moment of silence and bangs the back of his head on the metal wall. There’s something clearly still on his mind, but it’s also clear he’s not spitting it out anytime soon, so against her better judgment, Robin lets her own eyes fall closed, lists a little heavier on Billy, and dozes off restlessly.

When she comes to next, it’s to that heavy feeling of napping for too long in the afternoons– you don’t know what time it is or for how long you’ve been sleeping, but your head is numb like cotton balls and something foul has died on your mouth. Before she can regain her

bearings properly, shake off that disoriented state of mind, she picks up on the voices around her.

“Just say whatever the fuck you wanna say, pretty boy,” it’s Billy, the first voice, and Robin recognizes his tone from that verging-on-desperate way he asked her in the car *what do you want me to say?*

There’s a pause. “It’s just– what’s your deal, man? I just don’t get you,” that’s Steve now and Robin can hear he’s real upset about it. Someone should tell him he’s not stupid now, that’s the cue.

“Nothin’ to get,” Billy throws, and she knows this one, it’s his very carefully crafted tone of *I don’t care*.

“Cut the bullshit,” Steve snaps, and right, he progressed from upset straight to irritated, “you know what I mean– why are you here, why are you helping us, why– since *when* do you have friends that are actual people and not like, dumb puppets? Why are you– I mean, you apologized and Max said you’re covering for her to go to the Sinclair’s– *what the fuck is your deal?*”

Another heavy pause settles and it’s long enough, Billy tenses enough, that Robin considers letting them know she’s awake, but he only shifts, hisses, “first off, keep your fuckin’ voice down because if you wake any of them up, I’m not dealin’ with no crying brats,” then, he takes a deep breath, exhales, “look, it’s none of your goddamn business, but you’re not gonna shut up about it, are you?”

Robin assumes Steve nodded, he is pretty stubborn, after all.

Billy sighs. “All you have to know is that Max said– *something*, alright, later that night. It made me realize some shit, mostly that I didn’t wanna be like that. And,” he hesitates, shifting again, “and I guess the shitbird helped too. About some other shit. Whatever, point is– I’m trying to be better, alright, so she called, I came. You shitheads were doing some stupid shit, so I came back yesterday. So if you want me to fuck off later, sure, I’ll do that, but right now, we’re stuck here.”

For the third time, the room lapses into silence and Robin tries to keep her breathing steady, focusing on Dustin's light snores.

"For the record," Steve says quietly, "you don't have to— fuck off, I mean. I think— whatever, dude. You're like, one of us now, you're part of this shit, that's how it goes."

"Sounds like this isn't your first rodeo," Billy points out, and even with her eyes closed, Robin can practically see the relief in his voice. She would know, it's the same that floored her after that one English project with Tammy, where she had spent half the time terrified Tammy would know, would figure out, would hate her, and then she didn't, she kept on smiling politely at Robin every once in a blue moon like always.

"Oh, man," Steve laughs, though it doesn't sound very happy, "there's so much shit— this isn't, this isn't even like, the tip of the iceberg."

"Dunno, kinda hard to think of something crazier than this."

Steve laughs again that same brittle laugh. "Dude, you have no idea. And trust me you don't wanna know, it's— it's fucked up."

Billy pauses. Then, "is that the reason you're always lookin' like a zombie these days?"

There's a cough, she figures Steve is choking on air. "How did— I'm not," he stops himself, sighs tiredly, "I guess. I didn't know anyone— look, it's kind of a long story and I don't really wanna tell it twice, and Dustin probably knows a lot more than me, god knows these kids never tell me shit, but do you mind if we wait for Robin to wake up? She'll wanna know too, you know how she is."

"Sure, pretty boy," Billy shrugs and Robin nearly slides off, and if he's muttered *shit* and the way he pulls her up again are anything to go by, that wasn't his intention. "Are you sure you don't wanna get some rest, though? Don't need you falling over when shit gets real."

“No, man, it’s cool,” Steve sounds like he’s shrugging, the idiot who doesn’t know how to look after himself *clearly*, “uh, thanks. You can, though, go to sleep, I mean.”

“Nah, gotta figure out how to open these goddamn doors.”

Okay, that’s her cue. They’re not having any deep conversations anymore and Robin is fairly sure Billy can’t be mad at her for interrupting his one-on-one time here. This will just get unproductive if she lets them unsupervised any longer, she can tell, and while she’s happy Billy is getting to talk with Steve without her or the kids as a bluffer, and she *is* having some thoughts on Steve’s allegedly heterosexuality, they have more pressing matters, like for example—

“Try the panel,” she says, blearily like she’s only now waking up and didn’t hear the whole heart-to-heart. The things she does for her friends. “You idiots are very loud, did you know?”

The looks on their faces are kind of priceless, half *deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car*; half *hand in the cookie jar*, and Robin puts on her best innocent face. “What? You were talking ‘bout the doors, weren’t you? So, the panel thingy, we could try to short-circuit it or something.”

Steve is the first to recover his face, clearing his throat and glancing away, “right, right, that’s, that’s actually not a bad idea. Hargrove, you’re good with cars, right? Think you can mess with that?”

“That’s not exactly the Camaro’s dashboard,” Billy narrows his eyes, studying the panel and absolutely pretending he’s not seeing right through Robin, “but won’t hurt to try.”

Robin sighs, righting herself and rolling her shoulders, and gets to her feet, stretches. “Awesome. *Go team*,” she cheers with fake cheer, “now up you go, dingus, it’s time to rise and shine.”

They both groan but drag themselves upright.

*

It doesn't work as well as she hopes and they fiddle with the panel, open all the internal controls, plucking at wires and short-circuiting the system. Some lame sparks are all they get after hours of working on this and Robin knows Billy is still going at it for the same reason Dustin is still on the roof repeating the same message over and over in that walkie-talkie of his even though it's like talking to the void— it feels too much like they're on the edge of something horrible and standing still feels too much like giving up. And giving up feels too much like digging their own graves.

Needless to say, the old boring Hawkins summer is something she's kinda missing right now.

“Ugh, can you redirect your stream, please?” She calls to the ceiling where undoubtedly Steve is taking a leak. Her annoyance dies out quickly, though, as she catches sight of Erica banging that green tube against one of the metal carts, worryingly close to breaking it. “Hey, be careful, careful, *careful!* We don't even know what that is!

“Exactly!” Erica sniffs, waving it around, “it could be useful.”

“Or it could be poison,” Billy offers, head halfway into the panel.

“Okay, thanks, Debby Downer.” she scowls at the same time Robin rolls her eyes, asks *useful, how?*

Erica makes a *duh* face. “We can survive down here without food for a long time, but if the human body doesn't get water? It will die.”

Behind them, still poking around the wires, Billy snorts real loud and Robin kind of hopes he gets electrocuted there. “I hate to break it to you,” she shoots back, waving the tube a little, just to make a point but not enough to make her nervous, “but this is not water.”

“No, but it’s a liquid, and if it comes down to me drinking that shit or dying of thirst, I drink.”

In the middle of Erica’s tirade, Robin stops paying attention and out of the corner of her eyes, she sees Billy snap back from the panel. Sounds of whirring are beginning to echo in the elevator, and when she presses her ear against the door, she can hear bits and pieces of what sounds like a conversation and more machinery moving. “Shit, the Russians are coming,” she trades a look with Billy, scrambles to open the hatch to the roof. Steve and Dustin both give her a weird look, but there’s no time for that, “we’ve got company.”

“Shit, come on,” Steve helps her up, and picks up Erica when Billy lifts her, pulling himself up next. And it’s just in time too, really, because not even a second later the metal doors are sliding open and two Russian soldiers are walking in, loading the boxes in their cart and scrunching their noses at the weird smell.

Her heart is at her throat as Robin watches them rolling back, holding her breath just waiting for the second one of them would look up and see them all there, in the roof, but none of the soldiers do and as sudden as they came, they are gone, door sliding shut again.

That sends them into a flurry of motion again, as Steve rips the tube out of her hands and vaults himself down into the elevator, barely giving the rest of them time to sensibly climb down like normal freaking persons. “Come on,” he’s saying, gesturing them to hurry up, the green tube the only thing holding the door open but not for very long, “go, go, go!”

Erica is the first one to go, of course, along with the backpacks, then Dustin, and then Robin, followed quickly by Billy and at the last second, by Steve, rolling out of the elevator just as the glass shatters under the weight of the door, green liquid leaking to the floor and sizzling as it dissolves concrete frighteningly easy, like it’s salt in water.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, catching his breath.

Robin, still coming down from the adrenaline, nudges Erica. “You still wanna drink that?”

“Holy mother of god,” Dustin breathes, looking around and Robin turns too and—

Holy shit.

The hallway ahead of them seems to stretch on and on and on forever as if they could walk for days and still not reach the end. The fluorescent lights bathe everything in blue and Robin can hardly imagine what could be waiting at the end– something terrible, something with teeth.

But-- forward is still better than backward, even if it's certainly dangerous.

“Well, hope you guys are in good shape,” Steve says, suddenly breaking the spell they all seemed to be in, and pushing past Dustin to start walking, “looking at you, roast beef.”

“Looks like I won't be missing my work out,” Billy grumbles, following, and Robin forces herself not to dread the long, long walk too much.

Maybe their luck will change, that's always a possibility, after all, and they will find very helpful signs pointing them towards the exit– hey, it's good to dream, right?

*

They have been walking for what, nearly half an hour? A whole day? A whole ass month maybe? Whatever, it feels like forever anyway, and they haven't seemed anything but artificial lights and concrete and pipes.

“I mean, you have to admit,” Dustin breaks the silence, sounding almost impressed, “as a feat of engineering alone, this is impressive.”

Dang it, the kid does have a point and Robin hates it.

“What are you talking about? It’s a total fire hazard,” Steve makes a broad gesture, probably trying to encompass the whole giant hallway, “there’s no stairs, there’s no exit, there’s just an elevator that drops you halfway to hell.”

Erica scoffs. “They’re Commies. You don’t pay people, they cut corners.”

Wow, okay, capitalist much? What are they teaching these kids in middle school? “To be fair to our Russians comrades, I don’t think this tunnel was designed for walking,” Robin shrugs, glancing around and thinking of the little trollers the soldiers had been rolling, “think about it. They developed the perfect system for transporting that cargo.”

Dustin nods. “It all comes into the mall like any old delivery.”

“And then they load it up onto those trucks and nobody's the wiser.”

Billy is the one scoffing now, arms crossed over his chest, “that’s a lot of trouble for some green acid that can’t even be a drug.”

“Yeah, I mean you guys don’t think they built this whole mall so they could transport that green poison?” Steve raises his eyebrow like that would be the shadiest thing that’s ever been done to this town and not at all in the realm of possibility.

“I very seriously doubt it's something as boring as poison,” Dustin shakes his head, “it's gotta be much more valuable, like promethium or something.”

Steve makes a face. “What the hell is promethium?”

God, he’s such a prep sometimes, Robin rolls her eyes. “It's what Victor Stone's dad used to make Cyborg's bionic and cybernetic components.”

“You're all so nerdy,” Erica fake gags beside her, “it makes me physically ill.”

And doesn't that send Steve into a fit. "No, no, no. No, don't lump me in with them. I'm not a nerd, all right?"

"Why so sensitive, Harrington?" She calls him out, singsonging, "afraid of losing cool points to a ten-year-old child?"

"No," he denies like he didn't just say no like, a thousand times, "I'm just saying I don't know jack shit about Prometheus."

"Promethium," Dustin corrects him with a sigh, "Prometheus is a Greek mythological figure, but whatever. All I'm saying is, it's probably being used to make something."

"Some new drug would make a fuckton of money, make it worth the trouble," Billy suggests, having been suspiciously silent in that exchange. Billy Hargrove passing on the opportunity to needle Steve? Something's afoot and Robin bets it has something to do with comic books. "But they're way off if it's dissolving the fuckin' floor."

Either way, Robin files it for later consideration when they're not in mortal peril. "Maybe it's powering something?"

Dustin perks up. "Like a nuclear weapon?"

"Totally."

"Walking towards a nuclear weapon," Steve grumbles darkly, in that slightly hysterical way of his, "that's great, that'd be great."

Robin, of course, politely ignores him. "But if they're building something, why here? I mean, *Hawkins*. Seriously. Of all places. At the very best, we're a toilet stop on your way to Disneyland, but maybe that's it. Maybe it's our very lack of importance that brought them

here. Who knows, maybe they think no one would notice if they dropped a nuclear bomb here.”

“The fuck, that shit would fuck up the whole country,” Billy scowls, probably thinking about that time they learned about Hiroshima and all. She briefly wonders what it would be like, to live in a radioactive wasteland and quickly decides she doesn’t want to know. “But maybe they think the feds aren’t looking since we’re in the middle of Bumblefuck, Nowhere.”

“You’re both wrong,” Erica crosses her own arms and Robin stifles a laugh at how she mirrors Billy with that cocky smirk, “the Commies are clearly trying to sabotage our country. They know we’re way ahead of them. I think they wanna steal our tech and stuff.”

“You think they’re so jealous of the great American Dream that they came to fuckin’ Hawkins to steal it?”

“No, dumbass, this is just they’re base of operations, they’re laying low. Who knows what they’re next step is!”

“Oh, yeah, a flashy mall– very low of ‘em.”

“Oh, my god, are you two gonna keep bickering about this the whole time? I swear,” she pauses, finally noticing Steve and Dustin have fallen behind, whispering to themselves like little girls, and snaps, “I’m sorry, is there something you’d like to share with the class?”

They both look up, then at each other, acting guilty as fuck and even shadier than usual, but before she could tell them exactly what she thinks of their little secrets, the walkie still inside Erica’s backpack hisses static, spouting more Russian shit.

Except, it’s familiar Russian shit. “A trip to China sounds nice if you thread lightly,” she translates, smirking at the end at her own outstanding job. “It’s the code.”

Dustin slowly smiles back. “Wherever that broadcast is coming from–”

“It’s close,” she agrees, realizing where he’s going, “and if there’s one thing we know about that signal—”

“It can reach the surface.”

Finally, after a whole night spent in a secret elevator and walking for what’s probably miles in a secret tunnel, there’s hope. “Let’s go.”

*

There’s a light at the end of the tunnel alright and it’s illuminating a whole ass military base and an entire secret lab, apparently.

It’s so far from what they had been expecting, so much bigger and so much more terrifying, Robin is surprised no one caught them gaping at the passing soldiers or the scientists or the crates or the number of rooms or you know, the entire fucking secret Russian base underneath their shopping mall.

When Dustin says it’s just like Red Dawn, Robin has to agree and her mind is like, blown right now. They’re in so much deeper shit than she had thought, sneaking behind crates to get to a maybe, *possibly*, comms room feels like a better choice, a smarter choice, than sticking around and waiting to be caught.

The soldier with the ugly headphones had definitely thrown a hench in their *oh-so-not-carefully* laid out plans, though.

And while Robin can see Billy is steeling himself for a fight, hands curling into fists at his side, she can also see the gun strapped to the soldier’s thigh. Come on, they had already talked about this shit, gun totally trumps fists! So Robin does the first thing she can think to stall this disaster from going off, she takes a deep breath and repeats the code to the man in pieces like she actually knows what she’s talking about.

It lasts for about a minute until he's tired of her nonsense.

And then— *god fucking damn it*, Robin didn't know she had to worry about Steve too.

Steve tackles the soldier into the control panel before he could pull out his gun, yelling like a madman, and gets thrown into a desk for it. He grunts, staggering, and Billy tears the soldier back, making him miss his punch, but he's not quick enough to avoid an elbow to his stomach.

Half of her kind of wants to jump in, but somebody has to keep an eye on the kids, so Robin has to watch as the soldier throws Steve into another desk, punches Billy in the nose, *hard*, but— the impossible happens. While he's busy wrestling with Billy, Steve clocks him on the head hard enough to send him stumbling face-first into a corner of the panel.

The soldier doesn't get up again.

“Dude! You did it!” Dustin crows and Robin can't help being a little infected by his enthusiasm, “you won a fight!”

Steve pants, laughing softly like he is having a hard time believing it himself, and helps Billy up from where the soldier had slammed him into the panel.

Billy's got a bloody nose but he's kind of smirking proudly at Steve, and Robin would tell him to quit drooling, but he's telling Steve something that makes him kind of smile, so she'll leave them alone for now.

The kids are arguing about something behind her, she's heard the word picnic thrown around, whatever that is supposed to mean in their actual situation, so she figures they'll be fine on their own while she snoops around a bit.

There's a door in the back with two strips of glass and when she presses against the transparency to catch a look past it, Robin loses her breath.

"Guys," she calls without glancing away, "there's something up there."

Something big, something crazy, something with teeth.

"Holy shit," Dustin breathes, awed, and she agrees as they all crowd around the door and glimpse into the impossible.

In front of them, a giant machine shoots a laser into the wall, tearing a rip in reality.

Shit. At least now they know what that green shit was for. It's kind of beautiful in that terrifying way most natural disasters can be— light glinting off the sea in a tsunami, a hurricane in the distance, a storm painting the sky dark blue and lead grey. Terrifying and dangerous and undeniably telling you it is about to end the world.

Steve and Dustin's babbling about gates is what finally brings her back to Earth, and Robin frowns, taking the stairs two steps at a time, "I don't understand— you've seen this before?"

"Not exactly," Steve calls behind his shoulder.

"Then what, exactly?"

"Yeah, now's a good time to tell that story, pretty boy."

Dustin makes an impatient sound. "All you need to know is that it's bad."

"It's really bad," Steve echoes.

“Like, end of the human race as we know it kind of bad.”

Robin is getting real tired about all this secrecy. It had been kind of funny at first, to think Steve had some dork adventure with the kids, but now it's kind of beginning to sound she's missing something big and very important here and this isn't a good situation to be missing any pieces. “And you know about this how?”

In his defense, Steve does look like he's about to tell them a very shortened version of it, but Erica beats him to it with a kind of scared tone. “Um, Steve? Where's your Russian friend?”

“Shit.”

Alarms start blaring and things kind of blur in her mind as red lights flash on and off, a harsh voice screaming in Russian from the speakers, and before they know it, they're running from heavily armed soldiers that are quickly gaining on them.

From up close, the laser is hot and blinding, and Robin skids around it, grabbing the railing for dear life as she vaults down the stairs just to realize they're cornered.

Holding the door with Steve and Billy is all she can do and if it allows the kids to slip away through the vents again, well. It's the right thing to do, they're just children, they should make it out alive at least.

Not that it makes what comes next any less scary. Red light glints off guns' muzzles like sunlight through the sea and the wave hits the shore, swallowing them in dry land.

*

The waiting is the worst.

Robin is locked in a windowless cell, alone to pace all of six feet while the Russians are doing god knows what to Steve and Billy. They must have written her off as harmless with their misogynist bullshit because they leave her pretty much alone no matter how much she screams at the walls.

It's eating at her.

Steve and Billy are probably being tortured right now and here Robin is, helpless and useless, stuck in a stupid cell. There has to be something she could do, anything to get them out of this, come on, *anything*—

The door swings open, she wouldn't be able to tell you how long it took for it to happen. She could've been there for an hour or an entire fucking day, time moves strangely when you can't see the outside world. But the door swings open and a big burly soldier walks in, grabbing her by the arm roughly and dragging her out. "Let's go," he barks like a bullet, and Robin digs her heels and trashes under his hand until she feels cool metal pressing at her neck. Then, she complies pretty fucking reluctantly.

"Get your hands off me!" She snaps as he shoves her into yet another room, but once she notices the two boy-shaped lumps on the floor— her stomach drops. Neither of them is moving, and Robin crawls to their side, breath hitching at the bloody mess that's Steve's face and shit, Billy's even worse, she can barely see his skin from under all the red, and *oh god*, her fingers are shaking too much for her to get a pulse, and distantly she's aware she's repeating their names like a prayer, pleading for them to wake up, but *oh god* what if they're—

Soldiers are heaving them into chairs and Robin is trashing again, kicking and screaming, and she's not going to give them an inch here. She spits on his face and laughs when he calls her a bitch. They're all bastards and she hopes he chokes on all that bullshit he's spewing.

The door closes with an ominous thud, and Robin just screams— out of frustration, out of anger, out of worry, out of this bubbling boiling feeling brewing on her chest that's threatening to topple over. Then, she keeps calling for help even though she knows there's no one to hear them because listening to her own voice echoing back in the room is still better than the graveyard silence that settles every time she pauses to catch her breath.

Minutes tick by before there's rustling behind her and— "hey, would you stop yelling?"

His words are slurred to hell and he sounds absolutely terrible but the wave of relief that washes over her is knee-buckling, stomach-flipping, and a tiny, selfish part of her is just so undeniably glad she won't have to do this alone anymore, Robin nearly cries. "Steve! *Oh my god!* Steve? Are you okay?"

"My ears are ringing, and I can't really breathe, my eye feels like it's about to pop out of my skull, but, you know, apart from that, I'm doing pretty good," he groans, she can hear him moving around, straining against the binds, "how's— he's still out?"

"Yeah," Robin tries to crane her neck to take a look at Billy, but it's useless. From his bowed head and lack of cursing, though, it's probably a safe bet to say he's not awake yet. That being said, Steve is alright, or as much as you can be in this situation, so Robin's going to go ahead and assume so is Billy, there's no other option here, okay? "He's out like a light. But the good news is that they're calling you a doctor."

Steve snorts, says dryly, "is this his place of work? Love the vibe. Charming."

"Yeah, tell me about it," she chuckles. Now that Steve's up, she can focus on their surroundings and her eyes zero in on the desk in the corner. "So, okay, do you see that table over there to your right? No, your other right."

"Oh, yeah, okay."

"And do you see those scissors?"

He hums in agreement.

"Yeah, well," she takes a deep breath, planting her feet firmly on the ground, "I think that if we move at the same time, we could get over there even with Sleeping Princess here, and then maybe I could kick the table and knock them into your lap."

“And I could cut the binds,” he finishes, getting excited.

She grins. “Yeah, and we could get out of here.”

“Gotcha. Okay, yeah, we can do that,” Steve says mostly to himself, and Robin echoes a *yeah* for the sake of pep-talking the heck out of this. “Those morons. They left scissors in here?”

“Yeah,” Robin has to laugh, deep down knowing it’s more than likely a bit hysterical, “morons.”

Steve laughs too, also sounding batshit, “total morons.”

They count to three, hopped up in this desperate hopefulness, and in their defense, they’re surprisingly synchronized, but when they jump, the chairs are slammed back by the wires tying them to Billy’s chair, screeching painfully on the floor, and—

And finally, *finally*, Robin allows herself to lose it a little and *laughs* because this is all too ridiculous. Why on earth did they think that would work? No, actually, why the fuck did they think any of this would work? Playing spies in a shopping mall when they’re barely competent to sling ice cream— *god*, it sounds ridiculous even in her head, she can’t even imagine what the fuck people would say, what the headlines would say. It’s just— she’s just— all of this—

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Steve shushes her and Robin kind of giggles even more uncontrollably because what the fuck even is her life? “Don’t cry, Robin— Are you laughing?”

“Yeah,” she wheezes between giggles, biting her lips to keep the worst of it inside.

“Jesus!” He snaps, and okay, she gets it, this is bad, but *come on*.

“I'm sorry! I'm so sorry,” she apologizes, trying to control herself and explain at the same time, “it's just I can't believe I'm gonna die in a secret Russian base with Steve *“The Hair”* Harrington and Billy *“I'm better than everyone”* Hargrove— it's just too trippy, man.”

Steve still sounds like he's not getting the absurdity of it all, but at least he's not being grouchy anymore. “We're not gonna die. We're gonna get out of here, okay? Just— you gotta let me just think for a second.”

And *god*, Robin kind of wants to tell him not to be stupid, they're way past any saving, and she kind of wants to cry too, because she doesn't want to die in a secret Russian base with her two best friends, she's got shit she wants to do and she's got shit she wants to say and Steve— Steve doesn't get it, how could he?

“Do you remember, um, Mrs.Click's sophomore history class?” She asks tentatively before she can stop herself.

“What?”

“Mrs.Clickity-Clackity— that's what us band dweebs called her,” she sighs, remembering that semester and High School and all that complicated shit, “it was first period, Tuesdays and Thursdays, so you were always late. And you always had the same breakfast. Bacon, egg, and cheese on a sesame bagel. I sat behind you two days a week for a year.

Mister Funny.

Mister Cool.

The King of Hawkins High himself.

Do you even remember me from that class? Of course, you don't. You were a real asshole, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve says quietly, more of a murmur than anything, so sad and genuine, Robin almost regrets bringing it up in the first place.

“But it didn't even matter. It didn't matter that you were an ass,” she continues, deciding a half-truth is better than a full-on lie as far as last conversations go, “I was still obsessed with you. Even though all of us losers pretend to be above it all, we still just wanna be popular, accepted, *normal*.”

And isn't that the million-dollar word?

Normal.

Before she met Billy, before she realized he was like her, he was *gay*, Robin thought— it felt like she was all alone in Hawkins. There was news from places like New York City and San Francisco and L.A., but they were all so far away. Hawkins is just a dot on a map and all these other cities were ink blotches half a world away in her eyes. She heard people talk and she's seen people bleeding, and she watched the woods fencing the town in, and thought there was a great wide somewhere, but— not to Hawkins, not to her.

Then she saw Billy looking at Steve like she looked at Tammy and all of sudden her tiny dusty town had unraveled a little. All of sudden, she had someone else to be alone with. Two sounds little, but it's still better against the world.

When she's hanging out with Billy, she feels *normal*. Like, she knows, rationally, that she *is* normal but— *shit's fucked*, alright?

“If it makes you feel any better, having those things isn't all that great,” Steve says, again in that serious, tired tone. *World-weary*, her mom would call it. “Seriously. It just baffles me. Everything that people tell you is important, everything that people say you should care about, it's all just bullshit. But I guess you gotta mess up to figure things out, right?”

“I hope so,” she admits; it’s a bit too late to be like, self-conscious about it, “I feel like my whole life has been one big error.”

Steve chuckles, resonates. “Yep.”

And she has to laugh again, “at least it can't get any more messed up than this.”

“You know,” he says, almost wistful, “I wish I'd known you in Click's class.”

Robin snorts, “yeah?”

“Really, I do,” he goes on, so earnest, it’s kind of sweet. Robin hadn’t known, back in school that Steve Harrington could be sweet. Then again, she also hadn’t known about conspiracies and monsters and gates. “Maybe you could've helped me pass the class. Maybe instead of being here, I'd be on my way to college right now.”

“And I would have no idea that there were evil Russians beneath our feet,” she adds, completes his daydream. She slides the pieces into place and holds the whole picture to the light, wonders if she would have liked it at all. “And I would be happily slinging ice cream with some other schmuck.”

They’re both chuckling, reminiscing these things that never happened but could’ve, so easily could’ve, when— “and I wouldn’t have to be listenin’ to your blabbin’.”

“Oh, *my god*, Billy,” Robin snaps again into focus, clouds dispersing as she lets the knowledge that he’s okay too finally solidify into certainty. “Are you okay? *Billy?*”

“Hargrove?” Steve’s calling too, shifting in his chair, “Billy— *Jesus*, man, you alright?”

“M fine,” he says, words jumbled and Robin remembers the cut on his forehead, the bruises all over his face, and *shit*, his eyes must be swollen shut by now. “Had worse before. You

shoulda seen the other guy.”

It’s such a poor attempt at humor and it lands so painfully flat, but Robin still chuckles because she’s clearly still losing it and Billy is okay and so is Steve, and shit’s fucked, but they’re alright, so. That’s gotta count for something. “Okay, tough guy, welcome back to the land of the living.”

“Everything’s terrible,” Steve says, faking one of those vacation commercial voices, “and we’re all fresh out of ideas.”

“Jeez, I’m really feeling glad to be awake,” Billy grumbles, groans, and kind of shivers, “shit, can’t believe this is how I die.”

“We’re not gonna die!” Steve corrects loudly even though he just admitted they’re shit outta luck here just seconds ago.”

“Hey,” Robin calls him quietly. It’s only fair to give him some truth too after she and Steve had some weird heart-to-heart that would probably worry the school’s counselor to no end if she heard even a snippet of it, “I don’t think– did I ever thank you for that ride home?”

Billy stays quiet for a moment, and even Steve says nothing. Then, “like you ever thank me for carting you around,” he sounds like he’s rolling his eyes, but Robin’s pretty sure he knows what she means and she knows what he means.

Somethings are better not said out loud. Robin’s still glad she got to be his friend, Steve’s too. Maybe she’ll even say it out loud if they make it out of there.

“And hey, Harrington–”

Billy never gets to finish that sentence.

The door buzzes open and the Russian Bastard comes in, his lackeys right behind him, and *oh, hell to the no*. He's got a big ass syringe with him and Robin's so not here for it— she hates doctors, *holy shit*, and she hates this situation, and she hears Billy cursing up a storm at them, and Steve is yelling something about hygiene of all things, and *shit*, what's even on that thing?

Whatever it is, it burns.

She feels it slipping on her bloodstream, burning like wildfire, and then— *nothing*. It all fades, further and further to the background until she can barely feel the aching on her body. She's feeling kinda floaty and light, and not at all like she's dying.

“Honestly,” Steve says, very far away and then suddenly very close, “I don't really feel anything. Do you?”

She thinks about it. “I mean, I feel fine— I feel normal.”

“I feel real good,” Billy agrees, voice way too dusted off, dare she say it— soft. “What ‘bout you, pretty boy?”

“Yeah, I feel,” he pauses, awed, “I feel fine. I kinda feel good.”

They all chuckle, and it's, Robin is feeling loose and relaxed like cotton balls. She's a cotton candy of a girl right now. “Wanna know a secret?”

“What?”

She bites her lip, holding her laughter inside like smoke in a glass jar. “I like it, too!” It bubbles up, slips out from under the door, and she laughs, “I feel good!”

“Morons,” Steve laughs too, head lolling around, and Robin laughs even harder, tasting sugar on her tongue, “they messed up the drug!”

“They messed it up!” She crows, laughing and laughing and *laughing* and even Billy is laughing, joining their chant, and the world’s a cloud, “morons! Hey, morons!-- *Morons!*-- Moron! Mor– Hey! Whoa,” sunlight filters in through the rainbow and Robin has a funny, funny, *funny* realization that maybe this isn’t normal, “oh, no. There's definitely something wrong with us.”

One of the Russians, ever the buzzkills, buzzing, buzzing, buzzing, ever the busy bees, comes closer and *whoa* what’s that buzzing in his hand? Shit, that’s not nice. That’s– that’s bad, that’s spooky, that’s, shit, that’s not funny, that’s not good. “Let's try this again, yes? Who do you work for?”

The question is for Steve, she thinks, so he’s the one answering. “Scoops. Scoops Ahoy.”

“Nope,” Billy cuts in, snickers, chair rattling like he tried to raise his hand, so Robin giggles, “not me. Public Pool lifeguard here. I’m not with the dorks.”

“You so are,” she singsongs because it’s true, Billy *loves* Steve “The Dork” Harrington, so he must be one of the dorks too, “you’re a dork, Billy Hargrove.”

“Am not,” he snaps, ‘cept it sounds like a whine, so she laughs again, and Steve laughs, and she says *is too*, and he says *am not*, and she says *is too*, and he says *am not*, and–

“Silence!” The Doctor, no, wait, not The Doctor, the doctor, lower capitals, yells, and they all startle. How rude. “How did you find us?”

Steve snickers again. “Totally by accident.”

And o *h*, my *God*, he’s such a terrible liar, does Steve know he’s a shitty liar? The Russians don’t seem to appreciate the comedic gold that is, though.

“What is that shiny little toy? Steve asks, and he sounds frowny, which— *boo*, it’s killing her buzz here.

“Where you going with that, doc?” The very shiny, very sharp saw pointed at her face is also killing her vibe and *oh, shit*, it’s about to kill a lot more of Robin too, “whoa, whoa, hey, hey. Wait! No! Wait! Wait! There was a code! We heard a code!”

“Code,” the doctor barks like they aren’t making up stupid codes down here, “What code?”

Robin laughs, head thrown back, and repeats the words that they had been pouring over for the past two days. “*The week is long. The silver cat feeds when blue meets yellow in the west.* Blah, blah, blah,” she smirks, and she hears Billy cackling too, wheezing, really, at her amazing Russian accent, “you broadcast that stupid spy shit all over town, and we picked it up on our Cerebro, and we cracked it in a day. *A day!* You think you're so smart, but a couple of kids who scoop ice cream for a living cracked your code in a day, and now, people know you're here.”

“You fucked up big, motherfuckers,” Billy shouts at the ceiling, probably, ever the drama queen.

“Who knows we are here, little bitch?” The very rude doctor asks, and Robin would tell him except she’s not dumb even though her tongue is feeling all so loose, loose like licorice. She bites back a giggle.

“Uh, well, Dustin knows,” hm, that’s, that’s not good, what’s Steve doing?

“Hey, Steve?”

“Yeah, Dustin Henderson,” Steve goes on laughing, and *oh, no*, Steve’s being dumb again, “he knows.”

“Steve!” She snaps, but everything’s cotton candy and clouds and Steve just laughs.

The Rude Russian Doctor frowns. “It is your small, curly-haired friend?”

Steve scoffs and probably smiles. *God*, why did he ask? Steve’s gonna go on and on and on about his strange children following. Robin’s still not convinced it’s not a cult, to be completely honest. “Oh, curly-haired. Great hair. Small. Kind of like a 'fro. Yeah.”

“Annoying as shit,” Billy adds, “too fuckin’ loud, man.”

“Where is he?” The Big Bad Doctor asks.

“He’s long gone, you big asshole,” Steve laughs full of lemon-tart spice, “and he’s probably calling Hopper, and Hopper’s calling the US cavalry. They’re gonna come in here, commando-style, guns a-blazin’, and kick your sorry asses back to Russia. You’re gonna be two pieces of toast.”

That’s impressive, Robin wants to see the cavalry, will they let her pet the horses? Also, can she have a gun? So that like, she can storm somewhere, guns a-blazin’ too? That would be so awesome.

Of course, Douche Doctor doesn’t think so. “Is that so?” And then he laughs, all phony and dumb, and Steve laughs, and Billy laughs, and Robin laughs, and suddenly alarms are blaring, and there’s like, red lights again, and the door is opening, and *oh shit*— that little itsy-bitsy girl and the curly mop kid have like, a giant spear thing! Whoa, okay, that guy went down *hard*. Good for them, really. Robin is like, all in favor. And *holy shit*, Billy had a point, Dustin is loud.

“Hey! Henderson!” Steve crows as his children untie them from the chairs with a distinct lack of cavalry that Robin will be very polite not to mention even though they owe her horsies now. “That’s crazy, I was just talking about you.”

You'd think the kids would be super chill, but instead, all Dustin says is— “get ready to run!”

*

They stumble through the halls like, like, marbles and Robin doesn't really wanna get in the stupid car thingy, but Dustin shoves her inside anyway, locking her and Steve and Billy in the back while he and the little girl take the front, and *oh boy*, they *so* don't know how to drive—the whole thing shakes and they slam around the walls.

Steve hits his head for like, the third time but Robin doesn't think it hurts too much because come on, look at all that hair, it's, like, cushion and shit. “Jesus, slow down!”

“Yeah,” she agrees, rubbing the back of her own head where it had heat the ceiling. Billy kicks her ankle, so she kicks his back, and the car wobbles again. “What is this, like, the Indy 500?”

“It's the Indy 300,” Steve corrects him, slurring like hell.

“No, dingus, it's 500!”

“You're both wrong,” Billy says, serious as shit, “it's 250.”

“t's 300!” Steve insists and Robin huffs, thinks *boys are so stupid*.

She has an amazing idea, though, that'll settle this for good, and it tastes like red Skittles. “Let's say a million.”

They all burst out laughing, floating along with the car's wobbly driving, and she can hear distantly Dustin and Erica arguing about something before everything lurches forward and someone screams *shit!*

Then, it's all *get out of the car, come on, get out*, like they hadn't *just* told her to get *in* the car, like shit, my dudes, make up your damn minds. She still follows them dutifully, of course, floating in a cotton candy cloud and whooping excitedly when their card thingy works.

It's all kind of a blur of colors and sounds and smells, and Robin is pretty sure Steve falls on top of Billy once and they all laugh, and *oh my god*, the air tastes *so good*, like, it tastes of chocolate cake and taffy, and Robin laughs and laughs and *laughs* as the tiny curly children lead them through the mall.

And like, Robin has never noticed before, but the mall is so pretty? Like, *holy shit, man, there are* so many lights, and she's so hungry, and everything smells like KFC and cookies, and can you imagine a whole pizza made out of that? It would– laughter spills out like popcorn when she drops down on the world's worst movie seats *ever*– it would be like, *finger-lickin' good*.

Okay, so, the movie is about a car– no, it's about a dog in a car– no, it's about a boy and Einstein in a car, and there's also a dog– no, it's about time travel and a dog and is that the boy's *mom*? She's hot but that's gross, and there's no dog anymore, so like, what's even the point?

"Billy," she whispers, giggling, "Billy, I'm thirsty."

"I bet you are," he snickers, shoves Steve's stupid bag of chips on her face, "here, drink this."

"That's food, dumb ass," she hisses, bubbling with laughter and he laughs too, and Steve leans over Billy to rescue his chips, but Robin holds it out his reach, "*no*, I'm *drinking* this, dingus!"

"You can't drink my chips!" Steve whines, and someone behind them shushes them again, so Robin trades a look with her boys and *laughs*. "Okay, okay, there's a– what's the name, drinking thing, you know?"

“Drinking fountain?” Billy asks, with like, the most disgusting heart-eyes Robin has ever seen and my dude, she used to make some serious googly eyes in Mrs.Click’s class.

“Yeah!” Steve beams, and she snorts, and someone shushes them *again*, and Robin is *thirsty*, “so, there’s one like, right outside.”

They tumble out of the theater like maple syrup, and Steve drapes himself over the drinking fountain, claiming first use or whatever for having the idea in the first place, and Robin would tell him that’s bullshit, but the wall is very comfortable right now, so. She’ll let him have that. “That’s amazing,” he tells them and dives back in.

Robin thinks they might argue about the movie for sometime, but she’s not exactly sure, everything’s kinda hazy and cotton-ish and floaty, and the water tastes so good and cool when everything’s kind of burning up, but the next thing she knows, she’s side by side with Steve and Billy, staring up at the ceiling and *oh*— it’s just so *pretty*! The lights swirl around the roof and the world sways, and Robin is *enthralled* by all this glittering, and it’s like standing on a boat on a chocolate river while the stars twinkle, twinkle *above the world so high like a diamond in the sky*—

Shit, she’s gonna be sick—

The bathroom is maybe the women’s bathroom, she’s not too sure, but she’s also too busy throwing up yesterday’s lunch down the toilet to exactly care about genders. In the stalls beside hers, she hears Billy and Steve also puking their guts out, and *ugh*, so gross. Her stomach lurches and she pukes again, heaving over a public toilet that she *knows* is cleaned in a very half-assed way, and reality tilts and tilts and tilts, until it finally settles into something less pulled out of a *My Little Pony* cartoon or Willy Wonka’s songs.

“You think we puked it all up?” Steve groans from somewhere on her right, and Robin collapses on the floor against the wall, pointedly not thinking about how gross the floor is. The tiles are cold against her skin and it helps keep a sudden headache at bay.

“Not sure there’s anything else fuckin’ left to puke,” Billy answers, groaning and heaving some more.

“Maybe,” Robin calls, head tilting back and hitting the wall with a dull *thud*, “ask me something. *Interrogate me.*”

Billy snickers loudly, and Steve snorts. “Okay, interrogate you. Sure. Um. When was the last time you, uh, peed your pants?”

“Today,” she immediately tells him, the words slipping past her mouth easily, and she laughs as Steve gasps and Billy chokes, cackles, “when the Russian doctor took out the bone saw. It was just a little bit, though.”

Steve laughs, and laughs, and laughs, “yeah, it’s still in her system.”

“Oh, all right, all right,” she clears her throat, gets her breathing under control, “my turn.”

“Okay, hit me,” he says, and—

And now that whatever shit they injected them with is leaving her system, Robin is coming down *fast* and if everything had seemed shiny and funny and happy-go-lucky, now it all just seems—bleak. Hopeless. The fact they almost died today is finally starting to hit her and like, maybe she should have taken Billy’s offer to introduce her to his friend. Maybe she’s just going to die alone in Shopping Mall. Maybe—“have you ever been in love?”

To his credit, Steve doesn’t hesitate, but the shift in mood is clear. The whole bathroom seems to grow quieter, smaller, like even the leaking faucet could disturb the tightrope that is this conversation. “Yep. Nancy Wheeler. First semester, senior year.”

Robin gags, imitates a gunshot to her head— which, too soon? “Oh, my god. She’s such a *priss.*”

Steve hums, clicks his tongue. “Turns out, not really.”

Yeah, right. Everyone's heard about their big fight last Halloween and her dumping him for Byers. Rumor has it, she's cheated on Steve with Byers, but Steve's always shut that shit down *hard*, so. It's also not like Robin is going to *ask*—

One of the stall door's bangs closed, and Robin hadn't meant to upset Billy, seriously, she's just bomb diving down from the highest fucking *high* ever and having a kind of existential crisis while she's at it. She hadn't meant to start talking about this and now she probably went and upset both Steve *and* Billy and herself.

"I need some fucking water," Billy grumbles, rinsing his mouth on the sink before stalking out of the bathroom, not bothering to wait for any of them to say anything else.

"What's up with him?" Steve asks, and okay, Robin's may still be high on truth serum or whatever but she's aware enough not to spill *that* secret.

She distracts Steve instead. "Are you still in love with Nancy?"

"No," he says without missing a beat and that's— someone's pretty sure on that, uh.

"Why not?" Robin thinks of their conversation sitting on the curb two days ago. It feels like a lifetime has passed between waiting for Billy to pick her up and sitting in a dirty bathroom floor with Steve. Still, she thinks of Steve's weird answers and the last twenty-four hours and thinks maybe, *maybe*, Billy isn't as hopeless as he thinks himself to be.

"I think it's because I found someone who's a little bit better for me," Steve chuckles, and Robin smiles. Good for Billy, really. At least one of them should get to be happy. "It's crazy. Ever since Dustin got home, he's been saying, *you know, you gotta find your Suzie. You gotta find your Suzie.*"

"Wait, who's Suzie?"

“It's some girl from camp, I guess his girlfriend. To be honest with you, I'm not 100% sure she's even real. But that's not, that's not really the point. That doesn't matter,” he sounds like he's shaking his head, then continues, voice weirdly distant, “the point is. He's been bitching at me about it all this time and he's so sure— he's just *so sure*, you should hear him going on and on about it— I'm starting to— I think he's not wrong, you know? This girl, you know, the one that he thinks I should ask out, it's somebody that I didn't even talk to in school. And I don't even know why. Maybe 'cause Tommy H. would've made fun of me or I wouldn't be prom king. It's stupid. I mean, Dustin's right about that too, it's all just a bunch of bullshit anyway. Because, when I think about it, I should've been hanging out with this girl the whole time. First of all, she's hilarious. She's so funny. I feel like, this summer, I have laughed harder than I have laughed in a really long time. And she's smart. Way smarter than me. You know, she can crack, like, top-secret Russian codes and You know? She's honestly unlike anyone I've ever even met before.”

This isn't happening.

This can't honestly be happening, Robin had been so sure— *oh, my god*, this going to fuck everything up in so many levels. She won't be, she *refuses* to be the Steve to Billy's Tammy, and Steve is like, one of her best friends at this point, she doesn't want to lose him. He and Billy— they're the two people in all of Hawkins that Robin actively *likes* and now. If she loses both of them, Robin is alone with all this knowledge of all this shit that went down and no one would ever believe her if she told.

“Robin? Robin, did you just OD in there?”

She runs a hand through her hair, tugging at the roots to ground herself out of a panic spiral, sighs. “No, I am still alive.”

A few seconds later, Steve slides into her stall, blank-faced and still somehow looking concerned.

Robin is suddenly very glad Billy stepped out earlier.

“The floor is disgusting,” she tells him, hopes this is all some fever dream, or maybe— maybe they can pretend this never happened. If they don't ever talk about this or even acknowledge it, did it really happen at all?

“Yeah, well, I already got a bunch of blood and puke on my shirt, so,” he shrugs, “what do you think?”

Please don't ask me about this, please don't make me say it, please don't let this ruin everything. “About?”

“This girl.”

“She sounds awesome,” she says, the sinking feeling that everything is finally catching up to her only pulling her down a Mariana’s Trench of an abyss in her guts.

“She *is* awesome,” Steve agrees and he looks like he’s bracing himself for another rejection and it’s not fair because he never had a chance to begin with. Maybe Robin should have been more clear about that. Maybe life isn’t fair but it shouldn’t be this hard. She really had— she had honestly thought Steve had been beginning to *look* at Billy, but. It’s not fair. One of them should get to be happy. “And what about the guy?”

Robin sighs. “I think he's on drugs, and he's not thinking straight.”

Or rather, he’s thinking *too* straight. Even in her head, the joke falls flat.

“Really? 'Cause I think he's thinking a lot more clearly than usual,” Steve counters but it’s like, he *knows*. He knows Robin is saying *no*, he knows she won’t come around on this, why is he still insisting—

Now that Robin thinks about it, about his *confession* or whatever— she thinks *maybe*— is this really what this is about?

Steve said *Dustin* thought they would be a good couple and if Steve is feeling as empty, as helpless as she is right now— she gets it, she’s been thinking about letting Billy play

matchmaker. You do stupid shit when you're hitting rock bottom.

Not that it changes the fact that she still has to get through this conversation first. "He's not. Look he doesn't even know this girl. And if he did know her, like— like *really* know her, I don't think he'd even want to be her friend."

"No, that's not true" he shakes his head vehemently, all shining armor, "no way is that true."

"Listen to me, Steve. It's shocked me to my core, but *I like you*. I really like you," she's really gonna do this, isn't she? "But I'm not like your other friends. And I'm not like Nancy Wheeler."

"Robin, that's exactly why I like you," and okay, first of all, that's kind of a shitty reason to like someone, but she'll just chalk it up to Steve being stupid about this.

She scoffs. "Do you remember what I said about Click's class? About me being jealous and, like, obsessed?" He nods, and she continues, "it isn't because I had a crush on you. It's because she wouldn't stop staring at you."

It all comes out in a huff of breath and Robin feels lighter than when she was high, lighter than she's felt in a while. She feels light like that day she had told Billy how she knew all about pining for straight people.

But of course, it still goes over Steve's head. "Mrs.Click?"

Robin can't help laughing even as she forces her ribcage to open a little wider. "Tammy Thompson," and maybe it's still the drugs, but now that she's started, the words are pouring out faster than she can think 'em. "I wanted her to look at me. But she couldn't pull her eyes away from you and your stupid hair. And I didn't understand, because you would get bagel crumbs all over the floor. And you asked dumb questions. And you were a douchebag. And—and you didn't even like her and I would go home and just scream into my pillow."

“But Tammy Thompson's a girl,” Steve frowns like he’s thinking very hard but the puzzle pieces are still not fitting quite right for him.

She nudges him a little closer to the light so he can see the bigger picture. “*Steve.*”

“Yeah? *Oh,*” his mouth falls open as it finally dawns on him. *Surprise! The friend you just asked out is a lesbian!* Robin doesn’t think they make cards for that on the 7-11 near her place. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah. Holy shit,” she echoes and waits for him to say something, anything. Does he hate her? Is he disgusted? Can they still be friends? Robin feels fear sloshing around her chest in tall waves, and it’s gonna wreck her heart like a coast town if he turns away from her now. “Steve, did you OD over there?”

“No, I just, uh just thinking,” he mumbles, looking a little lost, a little mind blown. And that’s— that’s not bad, right? His face is slowly going red, though, and his eyes flicker to the bathroom door, down at his shoes. *Oh.* Maybe Robin had been right, after all. Maybe Steve is here, asking her out in a dirty bathroom because it makes sense because it’s *safer*. Because sometimes it’s easier to stick to what you know than taking a leap of faith.

She does feel a little better for not seeing this whole disaster proposal coming, though.

“Okay,” she says, and takes a chance herself, “Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you really wanna go out with me?” She asks, looking him right in the eyes and catching his whole *deer-in-headlights* expression. “Or did you just ask me ‘cause Dustin suggested and you didn’t wanna be alone?”

Steve flounders, hesitating for a long minute before he sighs, sags against the wall. “It’s not— I meant what I said, okay? You *are* awesome and shit. And I do like you, just not like

that yet, so it just seemed—”

“Safer?” She guesses, softly.

“Yeah,” he glances away, down at his hands, “I didn’t know you were— that you didn’t—”

“You can say *lesbian*, it’s not a bad word,” she snorts, less wired now that things are defusing, that everything is finally making sense again and it doesn’t feel like she had slipped and fallen in some *twilight zone* shit.

“Right. I didn’t know you were a lesbian,” Steve corrects himself, “so the more Dustin nagged about it, the more it just made sense, you know?”

“I guess,” Robin shrugs, kind of itching for a cigarette, “in a very heteronormative sort of way.”

Now, it’s Steve’s turn to snort. “Yeah. More sense than— anyway. Can we never mention this again?”

“Dunno,” she grins, not missing how Steve cut himself off right there, “I kind of want to laugh about this later, when we’re not like, in mortal danger.”

“Shut *up*, ” he groans, glaring half-heartedly before it turns into a smirk, “I mean, you can’t talk about embarrassing, you liked *Tammy Thompson*— she’s cute and all, but I mean, she’s a total dud.”

Robin startles, snickers. “She is not.”

“Yes, she is,” Steve laughs, probably thinking about all the times Tammy made like, little shows at the cafeteria, “she wants to be, like, a singer. She wants to move to, like, Nashville and shit.”

“She has dreams,” she feels the need to defend, even as she’s holding back laughter herself.

“She can't even hold a tune. She's practically tone-deaf. Have you heard her? *You see me now tonight—*”

“Shut up!”

“— *you see me,*” and Steve has to stop his horrible screeching because he’s laughing too much to keep it up, and they’re being probably way too loud for people being chased by secret Russians.

“She does not sound like that,” Robin argues, openly laughing now. The relief of not losing both friendships is making her giddy all over again.

“She sounds exactly— that's a great impersonation of her,” Steve says, choking on air like an *idiot*.

“She does not— you sound like a Muppet!”

“ *She* sounds like a Muppet, she sounds like a Muppet giving birth!”

And they laugh and it feels *normal*. It feels like maybe life isn’t exactly fair, but sometimes it can be good. “*And if you could hold me tight, we’ll be holding on forever!*”

“What the fuck,” Billy deadpans, and *oh*, he’s standing right there in front of their stall and he looks like’s holding back his own laughter at their terrible singing, but there’s still something shuttered about his face that makes Robin want to yell that *not all hope is lost!* She found out a whole lot of things in the last five minutes!

“Steve says Tammy sings like this,” Robin hiccups, head lolling lazily to look at him, still grinning, “by the way, he knows about my big embarrassing crush on her.”

Billy looks at Steve, studies him, really, like he’s trying to gauge a whole lot of things too, and maybe finds like, half of what he’s looking for. Now, he does smirk. “Yeah? Did you tell him ‘bout that time you spilled like, half a bottle of syrup ‘cause she smiled at you?”

“Shut *up!*” She yells, kind of falling sideways, and Steve tells Billy to tell the whole story, and everyone is laughing, and things truly feel like they might start looking up.

*

Of course, that’s exactly when it all goes to shit again.

They left the theater and blended seamlessly with the crowd like pros right up until the point where the Russians had been freaking checking people’s IDs at the doors and they had to book it back to the stores.

She has to give it to people, though, they do clear out of the building remarkably quick for a bunch of hicks that are seeing a mall for the first time. Robin knows she’s gotta include herself in the hick bunch, but hey, she’s fighting off a whole ass conspiracy here, give her a break.

They’re hiding behind the counter of a *Great Cookies*’ store and Robin can hear the soldiers talking in their radios and guns cocking, and they’re so gonna die, aren’t they? She squeezes her eyes shut, waiting for the second bullets start flying when—

A car honks, its alarm wailing in the empty mall, and she trades a look with Billy, mouthing *what the hell*, when something fucking *slams* against the wall, metal and plastic clattering together along with the soldiers’ screams.

“Holy shit,” she breathes, peeking out from under the counter. An entire fucking car is smoking, crashed to the wall next to them. *What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck—*

“Guys!” Dustin bursts beside her, already vaulting over the counter, and Robin looks up.

The first thought that crosses her head is— *of course there are more children.*

Up on the second floor, there is a bunch of like, twelve years old or something, clattering down the stairs to meet them, apparently supervised by no other than Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. Robin thinks of Steve saying Nancy isn’t that much of a priss and thinks he might have been right.

Steve and Erica are next, running right behind Dustin to meet the others, but Robin and Billy stay behind, lingering at the outskirts of the reunion playing out. It feels kind of like they’re intruding as everyone hugs each other and like, she’s still sort of hung up on the car? Because that thing is *heavy*, how the fuck did any of them did *that*?

“*BILLY?*” Max screeches and Robin feels Billy tensing up beside her, and okay, this seems a little more interesting to watch than Steve weepily checking over his children or whatever. “What are you doing here? Oh, my *GOD*, what HAPPENED to you?”

“What are *you* doing here, brat?” He demands, stalking over to Max and glaring fiercely at Nancy and Jonathan. “Did you two bring my sister to a fucking gunfight?”

“What, I,” Nancy seems to be at a loss of words like this reaction isn’t quite what she had been expecting and now she’s trying to rearrange her world view to fit. “We, uh. We ran into them, actually. I’m sorry, but what are *you* doing here?”

Billy ignores her, though, choosing to fuss over Max instead, which leads to a whole new argument between the two— a *very* loud argument where Robin *thinks* they’re both snapping at each other for being in danger? She’s not, she’s not entirely sure or anything, but it kind of ends with Max suddenly throwing her arms around his middle for a half a second and then screaming at him again.

Okay, that's enough time for all the reunions, yeah. It's time for some fucking answers. "I don't understand what happened to that car."

"El has superpowers," Dustin *oh-so-helpfully* provides.

"I'm sorry," Robin blinks, looking between the group and waiting for someone to start making some fucking sense, *please*.

"Superpowers," Steve butts in, "she threw it with her mind, c'mon, catch up."

"Did you just fucking say that little girl threw that fucking car?" Billy is suddenly beside her again, Max slipping to Lucas' side— and *goddamn it*, when did she start knowing all their damn names? She blames Steve and his open doors policy all summer— still giving them all the stink eye.

Erica gapes, "that's El?"

"Who's El?" Robin asks.

"I'm sorry, who are *you*?" Finally, someone who isn't Robin is making questions here. Nancy looks between her and Billy, frowns even deeper, "and what are *you* doing here again?"

"I'm Robin. I work with Steve," she says simply, "and Billy was helping with the code because I asked him."

"She cracked the top-secret code," explains Dustin.

"Yeah, which is how we found out about the Russians," adds Steve.

“Russians? Wait, what Russians?” Asks Byers.

“*The* Russians!” Steve snaps, gesturing around.

“Those were Russians?” Max interrupts, glaring at her brother, “you got beat up by *Russians?*”

“Some of them,” Erica amends.

“What are you talking about?” Lucas cries, glaring at his sister.

Dustin makes a face. “Didn't you hear our code red?”

“Yeah,” Mike says, holding up a walkie, “couldn't understand what you were saying.”

Dustin curses. “God *damn* low battery.”

It sends Steve into one of his *mom* fits. “How many times do I have to tell you with the low battery?”

“Well, everything worked out, didn't it?” Dustin argues stubbornly, and Robin would very much like maybe to sit down because this is escalating *very* quickly.

“Worked out? We almost died,” Erica screams at him.

“Yeah, but we didn't, did we?” And alright, clearly that's the hill Dustin is choosing to die on, he's not budging.

“It was pretty damn close,” Steve also screams, and Billy gets in the middle, waving a hand around the two of them, “we got fucking *tortured!*”

“Okay, Russians?” Lucas says loudly over them, trying to wrangle things back on track, “as in, they're working for the Russian government?”

“What are you not comprehending? Am I not speaking English?” Dustin throws his hands up and even Robin groans— can they just fucking move on from the Russians? “We have a full-blown Red Dawn situation!”

“So this has nothing to do with the gate?” Max perks up.

“It has everything to do with the gate—”

Nobody pays attention to whatever shit Dustin had been about to say because before he could finish his sentence, the El girl freaking *collapses* to the floor and when they pull up her pant leg, it's— it's freaking *gross*. There's something in there and it's moving, it's wiggling, and it's *so gross*, and why are they letting Jonathan Byers fucking do surgery or some shit on her leg with a *Bed, Bath, and Beyond* knife?

The Wheeler kid is holding on to the girl like she's dying and honestly? Her veins are *black* around it so for all Robin knows, she *might be*. On her other side, Max is crushing her hand, and Billy is trying to tell her not to look, but it's stupid and useless, and she thinks it's more about keeping it cool than any real hopes that Max would do what he says.

And then— *and then*— holy crap, *holy crap*, the little girl— *El*, she just— she does it herself. She extends her hand and she fucking— she screams and all the glasses on their floor explode and she fucking *pulls* the, the maggot thing that had been attached to her leg and throws it away.

It's both the coolest and grossest shit Robin has ever seen.

“What’s going on here?”

*

As she sits, *collapses*, in the fountain benches, Robin remembers being in a car with Billy and thinking Hawkins had just become a whole ‘nother town.

It feels like so, so long ago; it feels like it happened to two different people and Robin is just a ghost who watched it all happen.

Like now, she’s just watching it all happen.

“No, you’re– what do you mean Tommy H is *possessed*,” it’s the third time Steve asks the same thing and Robin knows denial when she sees it, but she knows–

Look, just because someone is being a dick in the present, it doesn't mean you weren't best friends before. It doesn't erase growing up together. Steve and Tommy might not hang out anymore, but they used to be thick as thieves.

“No, Nancy, that’s– we have to do something to save him,” Steve bats Nancy’s fluttering hands away and Jonathan's kind, understanding eyes never meet his. With a sigh, Robin glances at where Billy and Max are having yet another hushed argument and stands up, brushing popcorn kernels and glass shards from her uniform.

Okay, it’s a little funny that she and Steve are still wearing their Scoops Ahoy uniform.

She sidles up to Steve and takes his hand, squeezes. *I’m here* . Not that any of the others notice, they all seem to be a little too busy retelling how they apparently trapped Tommy in the Public Pool’s sauna? It’s unclear, there are too many children talking at once for her to get what exactly has gone down. It might have involved someone going through a brick wall.

“This is,” Steve sighs, long and drawn out, and drags a hand across his face, deflating as he goes. “Okay, whatever, go on.”

As the Wheeler kid goes on to talk about how something big and ominous apparently aptly called *The Mind Flayer* built something equally big and ominous out of fucking *melted people*, Robin sees Max shake her head stubbornly and Billy laughs, flicking her ear and earning a middle finger to his back before rejoining the group.

“Okay, so, just to be clear, this,” Steve is saying, still frowning deeply but looking like he’s compartmentalizing the hell of this, “this big fleshy spider thing that hurt El, it’s some kind of gigantic weapon?”

Nancy nods. “Yes.”

“But instead of, like, screws and metal, the Mind Flayer made its weapon with melted people.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Yeah, okay. I,” Steve shakes his head briskly, lets go of Robin to run a hand through his hair. Beside him, Billy is making a face. “Yeah, I’m just making sure.”

“So there’s a giant monster out there, hunting down Carrie here,” Billy says slowly, nodding along, “and somehow it’s up to us and a bunch of brats to stop it.”

“We’re not *brats*,” Max snaps, bristling, but Billy only continues, sedately with a, “shut it, carrot top.”

Byers and Nancy trade a confused look, but it’s Mrs. Byers that frowns, “yes, are we sure this thing is still out there, still alive?”

Max grimaces, “El beat the shit out of it, but, yeah, it's still alive.”

“But if we close the gate again,” and here we go with this gate thing again.

“We cut the brain off from the body—”

The conversation goes on around her and Robin retreats to the nearest fast-food chain. There's only so much craziness she can swallow tonight and they're so far past her limit, she can even remember what it was like before. She hops over the counter, rummaging absently for anything resembling edible food— she hasn't eaten since *yesterday*, she's starving.

“Hey, pass me that bag of chips,” a voice asks from behind and Robin takes her time filling in her Coke before turning around to throw Billy his chips. He looks exhausted in this light, bruised all to hell, and cleaning up in the bathroom didn't get rid of the blood splattered on his white tank top. If it can even be called white at this point. “Bitch,” he grumbles, jumping up the counter.

Robin sips her Coke, still mildly nauseous from the drugs, and lets her own exhaustion wash over her body for the first time since they got into a room that turned out to be an elevator. It's like breaking a dam and suddenly, she needs to sit down on the floor. “Jesus, I feel like we've been down here for like, a hundred years.”

“Feels like I got run over by a goddamn truck,” he says through a mouthful of chips like the gross asshole he is, “my head is killin' me.”

“*Oh, my god*, mine too,” she perks up. There's something about sharing these painful experiences that makes it less shitty. Also, she might still be a bit out of it. “It's like, it's like there's a drill, drilling into my skull.”

“I can't believe I'm hungover without even drinking,” Billy yawns, glances back to watch everyone crowding over a map while that weird bald dude argues with Erica. “Man, this is crazy, this is— what the fuck is even going on.”

“I’m trying not to think too much,” she admits, setting her cup down to make grabby hands for the food, “I mean, superpowers? That girl threw a whole ass *car* into the Russians.”

Billy tosses her the bag. “Well, don’t forget about the fuckin’ flesh monster.”

“And the alternate dimension.”

“And the possessed dude.”

They stare at each other for a moment, letting it sink in, and then burst out laughing, less hysterical than Robin had expected and it leaves her feeling a little lighter again. Normal.

“Ugh, tell me you’re not still high,” Steve scrunches his nose, leaning on the counter beside the spot Billy is sitting. His elbows are resting close enough that they must be touching the denim of Billy’s jeans and Robin sees the way Billy’s breath hitches.

Taking pity on him, Robin sticks her tongue at Steve. “Sometimes people laugh together without drugs, dingus. It’s a little sad that you didn’t know that.”

“Can you like, can you give me a break for five minutes?” Steve groans and accepts a cup of Pepsi from her gratefully. So easy to bribe, seriously. “I think I need to sleep for like, a whole week after this.”

“You and me both, pretty boy,” Billy says, catching the bag Robin tosses back, and hands it over to Steve. “Is this shit what you had to deal with last year?”

“Sort of,” he hesitates, “it had more to do with the Upside Down. I mean, there were no Russians, for one. That I know of, at least. I meant what I said, those kids don’t tell me shit, all I know is that there were these tunnels under the town and demodogs and like, evil vines, and it was infecting the pumpkins– also, there was something going on with Will, too? Dunno, but we ended up setting fire to the tunnels.”

Billy stares at Steve for a few seconds after he stops talking, sort of gaping— for once not because of his dumb crush— and it kind of hits Robin that there really was so much shit going on, like, a whole apocalypse, and she hadn't noticed a thing. "Damn, Harrington," Billy whistles, "that house gave me the heebie-jeebies that day but shit, I didn't know there were *monsters* around."

"Yeah, we had one like, in the fridge and shit," Steve shrugs one-shouldered, stuffing his face with the chips, "but it's whatever."

It's not really *whatever*, but they both seem to be kind of keen on not talking too much about what happened that night at the Byers so she figures changing the subject is for the best.

"Hey, Steve?" Robin says, looking resolutely at the gallon of bleach under the counter, "I'm sorry about Tommy H."

Jesus, that sounded lame. "Yeah, man," Billy picks up where Robin left off, and she thinks she sees Steve leaning on him on the counter, but she pretends not to notice anything. "Tommy was a dickhead, but— this shit is fucked up."

Yeah, shit's always been fucked up, just add it to the list. *But it's whatever* Steve had said and, well. What else is there to say?

"Thanks," Steve grunts, sighing tiredly. None of them have slept in over a day and it's really starting to show on him. "Like you said— shit's fucked up. But it'll be fine after Hopper and Joyce close the gate."

And just like that, as if summoned by his name, the Chief hollers from the tables, calling Steve's name. And just like that, their breathing room is over.

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“You sure you’re gonna be okay, shitbird?” Billy asks her while they wait for Dustin and Erica finish packing whatever shit they need to take to their Cerebro. His brow is creased and she can tell he’s genuinely worried, a mutual feeling, really, considering he’s the one that’s gonna stay here, in the epicenter of things. “There’s still room in the princess’ car over there.”

“Nah, I gotta keep an eye on the shitheads,” she nods toward where Steve and Dustin are arguing over which maps to bring while Erica parses through the papers and chooses it all herself. “Someone needs to be the adult there.”

He snorts, shaking his head, and Robin thinks this isn’t at all like what she expected her summer to be. Or Hargrove to be. “Good luck, then. Shit’s real bad if you’re gonna be the voice of reason.”

She glares half-heartedly, too keyed up on monster stories and shadow dimensions to really joke around. “Shut up, asshole. Have fun babysitting the toddlers.”

Before Billy says anything else, though, Steve knocks shoulder with her, keys dangling from his fingers. “Hey now, I’m the only babysitter here.”

“Yeah, that’s a really weird thing to brag about,” Robin makes a face, and Billy cackles.

“Sure you are, pretty boy,” he smirks, “far from me to take your throne.”

Steve groans, rolling his eyes, all dramatic. Really, these two deserve each other—goddamn drama queens. “Yeah, yeah, cut the crap,” then he grows more serious, eyes hard in the fluorescent lights, “for real, though, you sure you don’t wanna come with us?”

“No, I gotta stay with Max,” Billy, surprisingly, does cut the crap, “can’t leave the twerp alone with some giant flesh monster hunting ‘em down.”

“Okay,” Steve nods, hesitant, looking behind his shoulder to check with Dustin and Erica before turning back to him. “We gotta go. Don’t get eaten or anything alright?”

Billy shrugs, smirking again. “Aw, you worried about me, pretty boy?”

Steve scowls, flipping him off, and Robin looks around the mall one last time before dashing after him. It’s go-time.

Pushing the doors open feels strangely liberating. They’ve been inside the shopping for so long, it’s relieving to know there’s still, in fact, a whole world standing out here, an open sky over their heads, light that isn’t man-made. She isn’t high right now, but the air still tastes great and not even Steve being gross will change that.

Then again, she has to give it to him that the license plate had already been gross in the first place.

They drive and drive and *drive*, the town whipping past them, buildings slowly being replaced by endless fields, and it honestly feels like Hawkins should’ve ended lots of miles ago. Small talk— and even teasing Dustin— gets old fast, and with Steve’s less than stellar driving, Robin is almost glad when the car breaks down. “Guess the Toddfather has its limitations,” she says dryly, slamming the door shut.

Making the last leg on foot isn’t so bad. The grass is cold from the night and the open field is a nice change from the stuffing underground, and Robin whistles impressed once they’ve reached the radio. She has to admit— it’s much better than she had imagined, and tuning in to the right frequency is the easiest thing they’ve done all night.

The bald guy, Bauman or whatever, sounds like he wants to skew himself with the walkie talkie’s antenna every time he has to radio in for directions, and listening to his bitter interactions with the kids is kind of funny. Like, she knows it’s a really bad situation, and they’re all in mortal danger and shit, but it’s funny as hell to hear him grumbling and trying to play nice.

Of course, that’s when it all goes to shit.

Again.

This time shit hits the fan with Steve pointing out the light show going on at the mall and Dustin is losing his shit on the radio but no one is answering. “Griswold Family, this is Scoops Troop! Do you copy? Over! Griswold Family, I repeat, this is Scoops Troop. Do you Griswold Family, do you copy? Do you copy?! Griswold Family, this is Scoops Troop,” they all crowd around the radio, heart hammering in her chest, and each time static crackles through, a roar instead of human voices, Robin flinches. *Please, don't be dead.* This isn't good, this is so not good. “Please confirm your safety! Griswold Family, this is Scoops Troop! Please confirm your safety! Are you en route to Bald Eagle's nest? Please confirm your safety! Someone, please just answer. Is anyone there? Just answer! Anyone, please Griswold Family, do you copy? Griswold Family, do you copy? Griswold Family, do you copy? Do you copy?!”

She's nearly wringing her hands when Steve takes off suddenly, booking it back to the car, and Robin follows, catching the walkie Dustin tosses her.

Shit, shit, shit, shit—

“They're— they gotta be fine,” Steve says in the car as they speed downtown, his fingers white in the steering wheel, eyes fixed on the windshield, “I mean. It's— they have Billy and Nancy and Jonathan. They gotta be fine.”

“Yeah, totally,” Robin nods frantically, swallowing thickly past all the *what if*'s clawing at her throat, “it's probably Dustin's radio— interference and shit. They're probably halfway to Illinois by now.”

None of them acknowledge the very real possibility that Billy and Nancy and Jonathan might not stand that much of a chance against a giant interdimensional flesh spider. It's just not— it doesn't matter. It won't happen. It's not a possibility. It *can't* be.

Robin says nothing when Steve pushes the gas pedal until the engine is screeching.

“Fuck,” she does say when the mall comes into view and Steve makes a sharp left into the parking lot because there, standing in front of her car, is Nancy, gun in hand as she shoots at a speeding car. “Is that—”

“Shit, yeah, that’s Tommy’s car,” Steve curses, and they idle in the lot for a second, but there’s no time to hesitate— Tommy isn’t stopping. “Fuck, okay, hang on.”

Steve gives her no other warning, running right into Tommy’s car hard enough to send it careening, and Robin feels her brain rattling inside her skull.

“Are you okay?”

“Ask me tomorrow?”

And *shit*, she *wishes* it stopped there. They don’t even have time to check in on everyone— as they stumble out of the wreck, the giant— the *freaking* giant flesh puppet arrives in the mall, a smell of rotten meat and chemicals wafting with wind, nearly sending her gagging again, and she barrels into Nancy’s car with Steve, no time to waste gaping at the impossible.

For the third time this night alone, Robin is in a car, speeding way above the speed limit. To be fair, this is the first time she’s being actively *chased*, so. No boring moments ‘round here.

Don’t get her wrong, she’s glad Nancy, the Byers, and Lucas are all okay, but the other half of their group is glaringly absent and Robin— you can’t blame her for thinking the worst.

“Where’s Billy and the others?”

“We got separated,” Jonathan explains sheepishly, like he’s real guilty about it, “Hargrove’s with Max, El, and Mike. They’re still at the mall.”

“Shit,” Robin breathes. No wonder Nancy is driving like a crazy person. Her little brother is kinda counting on her to keep this shadow monster shit at bay too.

“We gotta keep this thing occupied then,” Steve says, all grave and serious, and they silently decide to keep an eye on it from the backseat. “As long as it’s here, they’re safe.”

Not that anyone had planned on arguing the point or anything, but the radio crackling to life puts an end to the chatter; it’s a true miracle that Robin still has it left on herself to be surprised by the fact that Suzie, Dustin’s imaginary girlfriend from camp, is very much real.

Their back and forth flirting shit is still entertaining and she wishes she had a recorder as the lovebirds literally– *literally*– burst into a dorky song. It’s worse than their pet names and Robin trades a wide-eyed look with Steve that says *we’re never letting him live this down* and in an incredible show of kinship, she just knows *everyone* tuned to this frequency is thinking the same.

Dustin is never living this down.

Then again, of course, *of course*, their bubble pops and reality crashes violently on her shoulders– the flesh puppet is turning around.

They have to go back to the mall.

*

Last year, Robin watched *A Nightmare on Elm Street* with Boyd, Tina, and Marge from band. They all huddled in Marge’s room and after the credits rolled, both Boyd and Marge refused to sleep. Robin and Marge had called them *scaredy cats* and thrown popcorn down their shirts. The whole notion of that movie– a nightmare that kills you for real, a supernatural killer with sharp claws and disfigured face, the paralyzing fear of something larger than life– it had all seemed so silly.

Of course there’s no monsters lurking in the dark. You die in your dreams, you wake up, simple as that.

What a fucking blind moron she had been.

She gets it now— the Mind Flayer’s puppet stands, eight feet tall, tentacles rippling in the air, rows of teeth glistening in the half-light, and Robin gets it now. Monsters do lurk in the dark and nightmares do step out of dreams. As long as you’re in Hawkins, Indiana, that is.

“You sure this gonna work?” She hisses at Steve, lugging a load of fireworks over to the railings. They haven’t seen any sign of Billy, Max, or the Wheeler kid and that’s worrying, it really is, it takes up all her mental space, but Tommy’s standing over El downstairs and she’s about to get flayed or straight up killed, so they can’t exactly send a search party right now. More pressing matters, even if the thought makes her wanna puke.

“No,” he admits, forehead perpetually wrinkled in concern ever since they tore out Weathertop, and weights one of the rockets in his hand. “But it’ll have to do.”

Across them, Lucas throws one and it explodes in streams of red and white and blue, and it seems to throw the giant thing off for a moment, so Robin looks at Steve, shrugs, and passes him another. “Hey, asshole, over here!”

God only knows how long they keep doing this, shooting fireworks at it, but they’re running empty and it’s nowhere near dying. They’re out of time and Steve is shouting at Dustin to close the damn gate and Dustin is shouting back at the Chief and Mrs. Byers

It’s *Hell* and Robin is so sure they’re *fucked*, when yet again the unexpected happens. On the floor, El had been whispering something to Tommy while they held the Mind Flayer off. Whatever shit it was, it *works*.

Tommy Hall, douchebag of the year, the guy who once pulled the fire alarm in Middle School to get out of a History quiz, the smarmy tool that never once acknowledge Robin’s existence in all years of high school, *that* Tommy, stands up, getting between El and the monster. He stands there and blocks its path, and Dustin is still yelling on the radio, but Robin can’t look away.

Tommy Hall stands up against the Mind Flayer and holds his ground— *plants his feet*, like Billy would say— while tentacles curl around his arms and gnaw at his hands and—

Oh, my god.

— and shoot straight through his chest.

Beside her, Robin feels Steve stiffening, hears his hoarse scream, and it's only when she tries to whirl around to dash after him downstairs that she notices she had been gripping the rails with white knuckles.

Fuck, fuck, fuck—

Nonsensically, she thinks the monster had killed himself by killing Tommy as she watches it crumble, *melt*, to the floor, screeching and wailing, but the radio crackles again with the Chief's voice this time. *It's closed, it's over.*

By the time her legs no longer feel like jelly, Robin finds Steve cradling Tommy's body, blood and black sludge staining his hands, his clothes, his hair. It's not fair, she thinks, *it's not fair*; it wasn't Tommy's fault, he *tried*, he *saved* El, in the end. He shouldn't have to die.

"Steve?" She asks cautiously, standing next to him, but not daring to touch quite yet. There's something sharp about seeing people break and she isn't sure he wants her around right now.

"He's such an *idiot*," Steve snaps, hands fisted over Tommy's shirt, "he's not— the fuck he did that for. Never did a selfless thing in his *life* but suddenly he had to play the hero— fucking *asshole*."

"Harrington," Billy crouches at his side and Robin hadn't noticed him arriving, but *fuck* is she glad to see him. A knot loosens in her stomach and she breathes in easier. "You gotta let go."

He eases Steve's hands open, gentler than Robin's seen him in a long time, and Steve lets him, swaying on his feet until he slumps backward, leans on Robin's legs. "Fuck, what am I gonna say to Mrs. Hall? Or, or, *Carol* – fuck, is Carol even alive?"

"Come on, Steve," Robin shakes his shoulder lightly, "you don't have to worry about that now. Let's– it's over."

"I'm sorry, Steve," Billy says, brutally honest, and tugs Steve up with him. It's scary how much Steve looks like a ragdoll, allowing himself to be pulled up, sandwiched between Robin and Billy. "It's– the fuck?"

What the fuck indeed. A bunch of SWAT-style soldiers storm the mall, guns pointed at their face, screaming shit she doesn't understand, and it takes way too long for them to realize *a bunch of teenagers* isn't to blame for this whole mess. They politely force them outside, draping blankets around their shoulders like that would make anything okay, and tell them to sit at the back of ambulances, on cots, anywhere as long as it's there and it's out of the way.

Robin sits beside Steve, fixes the blanket more neatly around him, and watches Billy do the same with Max in the cot on their left. Not that she lets him, really, but she does scoot closer, and Robin trades an exhausted look with Billy over her head. *It's over.*

"Shit, I gotta pick up Dustin and Erica," Steve jumps up, blanket falling to the dirty asphalt, a manic look in his eyes. "They're waiting– tell Hop I'll give my statement tomorrow, I won't talk, I know the drill, just– I gotta pick 'em up."

"I don't think," Robin says carefully, frowning at his shaking hands, "I don't think that's a good idea, Steve. Why don't you just sit back down and we'll find a deputy to pick them up for you?"

"No, they won't know where they are," he shakes his head, suspiciously stubborn, "I just gotta– I can't be here, Robin. Not right now."

Well, shit. She glances around; no one is paying attention. "Fine, I'll cover for you, dingus. But be careful, okay?"

Steve smiles faintly, a copy of a copy of a copy of a smile. “Thanks, Rob.”

She watches the Byers huddle around themselves and El cling to the Chief for dear life, Nancy and her little brother side by side, packed tightly on their blankets, even Max is leaning on Billy. She watches the dust settle and Steve walk away, calls. “Hey, Steve?” He pauses. “Are you okay?”

“Ask me tomorrow,” he says, driving away.

The sun is rising at the edge of Hawkins when Robin slides into the passenger seat of Billy's car, a sleeping Max in the backseat, and nothing's the same.

Chapter End Notes

and hey, you can now also find me at my brand new twitter [@nancy_wheels](https://twitter.com/nancy_wheels)!

aftermath

Chapter Summary

tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow-- life goes on.

Chapter Notes

big thanks to [CycloneRachel](#) for proofreading this for me! Friend, you are a lifesaver! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It should be raining.

Funerals aren't supposed to have happy weather with the sun shining brightly over the graveyard, yellow light turning the grass greener and reflecting off the priest's ring.

Her mother had made Robin wear a black dress and now the hem itches at her calves, and Robin can't concentrate on what's being said. Tommy's mom is crying in the front row and Tommy's father is icily standing by her side, and beside Robin, Steve has been staring at the ground ever since they got here.

So much for closure.

It should be raining and Robin resents the sky for being a cloudless blue, and Tommy H's funeral is only one in dozens. Hawkins is shrouded in grief and Robin is supposed to be one of the lucky ones that didn't lose anyone in the Russian experiments.

That's what they're calling it-- *the Russian experiments*. Some freaky explosion that killed half the city.

If only.

The girl, El, is here, too, clutching Chief Hopper's hand and crying silently. Apparently, she had some weird connection with Tommy, especially right at the end.

And Robin feels kind of like a fraud for being here. She didn't know Tommy H. She knew *of* him and she used to think he was an idiot and a dick. Then she saw him die holding off an interdimensional monster, and now she's at his funeral.

But once upon a time, Tommy H grew up with Steve. Once upon a time, they had been best friends and now Tommy is dead and Steve is looking only half-alive. *He knew Carol too*, she remembers, *this isn't his first funeral this week*.

So Robin is here and when everyone files out, when it's only Robin and Steve and Billy and El and Nancy and Jonathan and Chief Hopper, when it's only those who knew what really killed Tommy H, Robin squeezes Steve's hand once, whispers, "we'll wait for you by the car, take your time," before looping her arm with Billy's and following the Chief and Jonathan out.

It should be raining but the sun is scorching all these freshly dug graves and Hawkins has never seen a summer like this. It has never seen so many funerals like this.

"You think he's gonna be okay?" Robin asks as she leans on the Camaro, Billy lighting up a cigarette beside her. Far ahead, Steve is still by Tommy's grave, Nancy and El with him.

"Yeah, Harrington's tough," Billy says, dropping ashes on the grass and scuffing it with his boot. Not far enough, the Chief is talking in low tones with Jonathan. "Just give him some time, he'll be fine."

His tone is flippant but Robin recognizes the worried crinkle in his brow, the twitching of his fingers, the cigarette to calm his nerves. Robin knows better, but she appreciates the gesture.

She also sees the way he's been holding himself more gingerly, never leaning on his left side, and the angry bruising on his arm, on his cheekbone, on his chest— none of them courtesy of the Russians, Robin would know.

“What about you,” she nudges his shoulder lightly, glancing at his face, “are you gonna be okay?”

Billy takes a deep hit, blows the smoke up to the blue Midwest sky, and genuinely smiles at her for the first time in two weeks. “I’ll be great,” he roots around his jacket’s pocket and digs out a shiny silvery key to dangle at her face. “Just paid the first three months for a two-bedroom downtown yesterday.”

“What?” Robin gapes, elation bubbling guiltily in her chest, and she can't help squealing delightedly at the news. Billy has shitty timing for these things but *goddamn it*, he's right, this is huge news— Robin throws her arms around him and Billy grunts in surprise, but still spins her once, laughing, before settling her back down. “*I’m so proud of you*— how, I mean, you were broke—”

She knows what it looks like to people outside, knows the Chief and Jonathan are probably having ideas, and this is still a funeral, but Robin can't bring himself to care, not when Billy is shrugging, brazen and proud, daring the whole world to take him on, “turns out, the feds were real generous with their hush money once they saw what really was down there.”

Oh, Robin knows. Her own bank account has never seen so much money at once. Community college, here she comes.

“This really is great, Billy,” she beams, unbearably relieved for him, like that tiny part inside her that used to be constantly worrying about him in that house is finally loose. It's okay to breathe.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll have to wait until next week to move in, though, so I’m staying at a motel outside town until then,” he grumbles like he's embarrassed and Robin struggles to school her face back into some semblance of blankness as they see Steve and the girls heading back. “You riding with him?”

Robin hums. “He shouldn’t be alone right now. You’re meeting with us at the diner later?”

“Can’t,” he shakes his head, reluctantly pushing off his car, “I’m picking up Max from the Wheelers’.”

Steve parts with a hug from Nancy and a solemn nod from El, diverging from their path to approach Robin and Billy. His face is less ashen, less empty, less *less*, so Robin figures she has to thank Nancy Wheeler and El for whatever they said to him up there. “Hey. Can I bum one?”

“Sure,” Billy offers him his pack and leans in to light it for him, swallowing thickly as he does it, claps his shoulder. He looks like he’s about to say something, but thinks better of it, squeezing Steve’s shoulder instead before walking away.

It should be raining, but the sun is hot on their backs as Robin pulls Steve to her side, wraps an arm around his shoulder, and slowly steers him to the Beemer.

*

The strangest thing in the aftermath is how little things change. Maybe it’s a question of resilience, maybe it’s just how small towns are, but Robin finds it off-putting how easily the people go on with their lives— yes, the mall exploded, yes there was a military base underneath it, but the grocery store is still lacking in the cereal department and the old movie theater is showing *Back to the Future*.

Nothing but hushed whispers every now and then to betray the earthquake of changes that wrecked their reality just three weeks ago.

The more things change, the more they stay the same, Robin figures— exhibit A: here she is, yet again, braving the streets at night looking for her shithead black cat.

“Lizzie,” she calls, whistling. You’d think a half-blind cat would prefer to stay indoors, safely tucked in her very expensive bed that cost two months of allowance, but no, of course not. And like, that would be fine, cats like to wander, no biggie, except Lizzie doesn’t see well in the dark and more often than not, she gets lost. Thus, Robin’s nightly walks. “Lizzie?”

The damn furball is gonna be the death of her, like, literally. Robin is gonna get eaten by a demowhatever and they’ll write her death off as some stupid animal attack and—

“Hey, Lizzie girl,” a voice calls from somewhere at her right and Robin whirls around, ready to go off on whoever it is, but— finds nothing. Just a lovely house with some lovely violet bushes and some— she snorts, some lovely dug up holes around it. That’s gonna be a bitch to fix later, poor bastards. “Up here, smart pants.”

Robin follows the voice, looking up, up, and *oh*. There’s an open window in the second floor with a flower pot with a wilted flower on it, which is a special feat, truly, considering it’s a succulent, those things are nearly unkillable, like, they could probably outlive humans in a nuclear apocalypse, and *oh, right*, leaning on the window sill, there’s a girl, petting Lizzie. A vaguely familiar girl Robin half-remembers from school and she’s petting Lizzie while the furball lounges on the window sill, and she’s smirking amusedly at Robin like she’s been watching her scream her head off around the street for some time now.

“Excuse me,” Robin stomps through the already ruined garden to stand outside her window, arms crossed, “that’s my cat.”

The girl snickers. “Lizzie, is it? After the Austen character?”

And because Robin is still annoyed, *irritated*, with the entire situation and also has never been particularly good at acting like a normal human being around pretty girls, she says, “or maybe it’s after the Borden character.”

“Ooh, spooky,” the girl waggles her eyebrows, makes a mocking scared face, letting the cat slip out of her grip and jump down to Robin’s arms. Lizzie purrs contentedly, wagging her tail twice. “You should know, then, that she’s been murdering my mother’s violets all evening.”

Oh, shit. “Oh, shit, I’m sorry,” Robin breathes, momentarily panicked, and glances down at the mangled bushes and the terribly revolved dirt, and wonders if she’ll have to run to escape spending her Saturday gardening. “She, uh, she’s kind of like a dog sometimes, she does that, yeah. Sorry?”

The girl shrugs and her hair flutters with the motion, catching the moonlight. It’s a full moon tonight and it had felt terribly ominous when Robin left in a hurry, no coat on, but now— now it just looks beautiful. “Don’t worry about it, I dropped an ottoman on them this morning, so she’d freaked out anyway. I should thank you, actually. Now I have an excuse for her ruined bushes.”

Well then. An ottoman, really? “Oh, okay,” Robin grins, “you’re welcome, then.”

It’s getting late and Robin should probably get going, Lizzie is getting antsy in her arms and she’ll start scratching soon, and it’s pretty dark, and Robin really needs to go home, so. “I’ll just— thanks for, uh, looking after her.”

She shrugs and disappears inside before Robin can return the goodbye, leaving her standing there, in this stranger’s house, with a cat in her arms.

“Well then,” she says to the empty space.

Mew? answers Lizzie.

The moon is shining silver in the sky and if it had seemed like a bad omen before, a watchful eye glowering down at her, now... it just glows.

*

“So, what do you think?”

Billy's question shakes her from her thoughts and Robin blinks, taking in the empty room. It's small, enough to fit only a bed and a closet, maybe a desk, too, but it's not bad. Even the stupid pineapple patterned curtain is kinda funny in that tacky way.

The whole apartment is like that. Small, a kitchen and a living room, one bathroom and one other room with matching curtains, but not bad. It comes with a shitty TV and like, three plates, one glass, and absolutely no cutlery.

"I love it," she tells him honestly, grinning, "especially the curtains."

"Fuck off," he rolls his eyes, arms crossed over his chest, but she can tell he's fighting off a smile, "they're ugly as shit, but I'm not waking up at ass o'clock in the morning 'cause the sun's in my face."

"No, I mean it!" She laughs, glancing at them again, the yellow pineapples clashing horribly with the pink background, "they're funky!"

"You're funky," Billy scowls, half at Robin, half at the curtains, then his face shifts into something less harsh, less brass-knuckled. "Real talk, you really like it?"

Robin considers it, grins. "Yeah, I dig it."

If she didn't know Billy, she'd say he looks almost relieved. "And you and Harrington are looking for new jobs?"

"We're being kinda lazy about it, but yeah, we'll probably have something by the end of the summer," she shrugs, tugging at the curtains to take in the view. This bedroom looks right into the street below, not exactly a nice scenery but—comfortingly normal. A constant reminder that the world is still spinning and life goes on.

Even after monsters and evil Russians. Even after a season of funerals that seemed to last all summer.

In any case, Billy's voice startles her once again back to the present. "Good," he nods, eyes fixed somewhere between the tiny pineapples, "'cause half the rent is yours if you want to move in."

It knocks the air out of her lungs. Suddenly, tomorrow and tomorrow and the rest of the year seems less scary, less dreary. Suddenly, there's a door and Robin isn't scared to open it. There's a future and it's only mildly anxiety-inducing. "Really? I— you mean it?" She bites her lip, imagines a mattress, a desk, fairy lights hanging and a wall full of shitty polaroids. She imagines movie nights and not feeling caged in by the ceiling during dinner. Freedom—giddy and exciting and exhilarating. "I could move in?"

"Of course, why the fuck do you think I rented a two-bedroom?" He shrugs, still talking to the pineapples, and Robin is *happy*. After Starcourt, she can believe she gets to be *happy*.

"Billy Hargrove," she says as he walks up to her side to stare out the window, knocks shoulders with him, "you are a good friend."

There's still the entirety of senior year before she can move in without being definitely disowned and it's gearing up to a hard long winter, but this place stays as a lighthouse now in her mind, always on, signaling a future brighter than she'd ever thought.

*

"Fancy seeing you here again," the girl says, grinning, and Lizzie purrs, tail waving in the wind. The succulent is gone from the window, replaced by a wilted sunflower.

"Did she commit any other felonies this time?" Robin smiles back, watching her pet the cat. It's been, what? Three days, yeah, and she's beginning to fear it will not be the last time she'll track Lizzie here. "I see the violets are making a valiant recovery, by the way."

The girl laughs. "Yeah, my mom's pretty much a pro by now," she buries her fingers in the fur, combing through the soft hair. "But nah, this one's been a good girl this time. Jumped

through my window to steal my popcorn.”

“Oh, you’re done now,” Robin shakes her head, looks away from the girl to the cherry tree in front of it. There are still cherries on the top where they probably couldn’t reach; it must have been pretty in the spring. Whatever. “She’ll never leave now that you fed her.”

To her surprise, the girl shrugs, careless, and her long hair looks soft, dark curls over her shoulder, and Robin should probably ask her name, right? That’s— it’s normal to do that, considering Lizzie is looking like she’ll be stopping by again. “I’ve got that feeling, yeah. So, will you tell me now— Austen book or serial killer?”

For a second, Robin is lost and it must show on her face, because the girl laughs, head tilting back, and it startles Lizzie into jumping down next to Robin. “The name,” she says, still smiling, “you never told me if you named your cat after *Pride and Prejudice* or the murderer.”

Oh. Robin flusters. “Right, yeah. I— I adopted her last year, just after I had finished the book, so. Jane Austen it is.” *Please, don’t think I’m a psycho, I just say stupid shit when I’m nervous,* she had meant.

“That makes more sense, yeah,” she nods solemnly before cracking, and Robin thinks this might be a good time to ask her name and maybe introduce herself; the air smells like cherry and she tastes it at the back of her throat when she takes in a deep breath—

But before she can say anything at all, a voice inside calls and the girl looks behind her shoulder, brows creasing briefly, and she turns to Robin with her hands already reaching to close down the window. “I have to go— but hey, Ms. Bennett there is always welcome to come back!”

And with that, she slips the window panel closed, curtains fluttering as if the whole room had exhaled and this is the second time Robin has failed to get her name.

At her feet, Lizzie mews chirpily and starts back home.

*

“Steve?” She knocks on the pristine wooden door again, listening to the sound echoing in the empty house. They all know the Harringtons aren’t exactly the homebody type, but Robin had honestly thought they would’ve at least come back from wherever the fuck in Europe they are for the funerals. And yet– “Harrington, you promised to go job hunting yesterday with me but you bailed on me, you asshole!”

There’s no answer from inside, but she hears a door slamming closed. It’s been two weeks since, well, they buried half the town, a month since Starcourt, and it’s kind of hit and miss with Steve. Some days he’s fine and they go to the diner to get breakfast food at four in the afternoon, and some days it’s like this. No answer. Just radio silence and Robin worrying.

She worries because she has nightmares that wake her up crying in the middle of the night, and sometimes she has to stop herself from calling everyone, making sure they’re all alive. Sometimes, if she’s not paying attention, she slips right back to that underground facility and it takes forever to claw back to reality. And she knows Billy drives by sometimes, hears the Camaro rolling down the street like he needs the reassurance too, and sometimes she climbs out the window and they drive to the quarry in silence, just the quiet certainty that the world isn’t ending.

And if the two of them are fucked up, Robin can only imagine what Steve’s like. She thinks he calls Billy sometimes, he said something vague about it but didn’t go into details, and that’s good, but he’s gotta leave this place more, Jesus. It’s like a goddamn tomb with all this silence.

“Come on, Steve,” she calls, leaning back to glance up at his window; the curtains are drawn tight and she can’t get a look inside. “Just let me the fuck in, we’re worried about you.”

Still nothing.

“I’m not leaving until you say something, dingus. I’m stubborn and you owe me at the very *least* a milkshake for standing me up.”

Finally, there's some rustling upstairs and the window is thrown open, Steve leaning out to frown blankly at her. "Raincheck?"

"No can do," Robin shakes her head. If she lets him get away with this now, she has a feeling he won't show up again this summer. She can't let him set a precedent. "Get your ass down here, we're going to that diner."

Steve looks frankly terrible, his bruises haven't faded completely yet and there are bags under his eyes that stand out even more against his pale skin. She purses her lips and decides it was a good thing coming out here today. Debating for another second, Steve sighs, defeated and tired. "You're a real piece of work, you know that? Gimme a minute to change."

Like she said, there are bad days and there are good days, and there are days like this— not good, not bad, just there.

*

It's another three days until Robin has to go looking for Lizzie again and this time she doesn't even bother checking somewhere else. She goes straight to the house on Maple Street with a cherry tree in the garden and pretends she hasn't been hoping for this.

And this time, she is getting her name.

Except—

This time, the girl isn't at her window with Lizzie. She's sitting on the curb, the cat on her lap, and headphones loud enough that Robin can faintly hear Cindy Lauper's *Time After Time* as she nudges her sneaker with her own. She looks up, startled, and stands up, allowing Robin to see her properly for the first time. Her eyeliner is a little smudged at the edges and her hair looks even longer now that it falls freely, red scrunchie on her wrist, and she must be a lifeguard too if the *Hawkins Public Pool* t-shirt she's wearing is anything to go by.

“Oh, hey,” she grins, but it’s not– there’s something different about it. Less bright, less happy. “Looking for this?”

She holds Lizzie up and the cat meows indignantly like, *how dare peasants like them treat her like that?* Robin accepts the reluctant package and sort of smirks, sort of grins. “So, out of your ivory tower today?”

Something flashes in her eyes and she grimaces briefly, looking back to the house. There’s a lonely light on in the living room and she shrugs. “Something like that. Dad’s being a dick, figured I wait for you out here.”

Relatable. Robin nods sagely. Then, because there’s only so much standing on the sidewalk two people can do without becoming suspicious, she clears her throat. “Do you want– I mean, there’s a diner less than a block from my place...”

The girl’s grin brightens and Robin swells with pride. “That an invitation?”

“Gotta pay you back for feeding this, missy,” she smiles, heart beating just a tiny bit faster. Robin isn’t good at making friends and she’s even worse at making girl friends, so. She’s nervous, that’s all.

“In that case,” the girl dusts cat hair from her shorts and waves at the street, “lead the way.”

Robin takes a whole second to unglue herself from the spot and she still doesn’t know this girl’s name but they’re going to a diner to maybe get some fries and milkshakes at seven PM. You know, stuff friends do, Robin supposes. She should keep that in mind.

“So,” the girl says, falling into step with Robin, “I guess we’re doing all this upside-down–”

It’s like just hearing those words is enough to send a shiver down her spine.

“ – but I suppose introductions are in order. Name’s Heather,” she finally, *finally*, gives her name and Robin holds it carefully on her chest. *Heather*. “Holloway. And yeah, my dad owns the newspaper.”

Well shit. Robin whistles. “That’s fancy. I’m–”

“No, no, wait!” The girl– *Heather*– interrupts her, laughing, “let me guess first! I’ve been wondering– okay, I think,” she draws it out, waggling her eyebrows just to add to the theatrics, “you look like a Helen,” she decides.

It’s Robin’s turn to laugh. “Nope. Not even close.”

“Okay. Jane?”

“That’s also a miss.”

“Anna?”

“Oooh, it’s starting to get embarrassing, I’m feeling sorry for you.”

“Okay, okay, just, the last one, I promise! This is my last guess, really,” she laughs and Robin snickers, dangerously close to a giggle, to be honest, “okay, here goes nothing– Daisy?”

“Really? *Daisy*?” Robin cackles this time, a full-bellied laugh with her head thrown back, “you think I look like a Daisy?”

When she next glances at her, Heather is smiling. “To be honest, Helen *was* my first guess.”

“Okay, I’ll allow it,” she says, *oh-so-magnanimously*, cracking another grin, “but if I can finally introduce myself?”

Heather nods. “Go on, I gracefully accept my defeat.”

“Ready? I’m Robin,” she announces, louder than necessary in the emptying street, like it’s the most important thing she’ll ever say aloud. Then, she juts out her chin, as if daring her to say anything. “So, do I live up to your guesses?”

“Robin,” Heather sounds like she’s trying it out and Robin wonders if she spent as much time wondering as she did, and grins, “like the bird. It more than does. It’s better, I like it,” she decides and Robin hadn’t known this was something she had been hoping for.

There’s something familiar about Heather, more than the whole *hey, I’ve seen you around the school* thing, something that tugs at Robin, nags and nags and nudges her to keep babbling shit until they reach her house to drop Lizzie off. Maybe it’s just that Robin really wants to be friends with her. School is starting soon and neither Billy nor Steve is gonna be there; it would be nice to have a friend that isn’t from the band. Like, sure, Nancy and Jonathan will be there, but— they’re not friends. They’ve been through all that shitshow together, but that doesn’t make them suddenly close. Well, they *are* close in that *we almost died together once* way and she can kind of get why Steve still hangs out with them even after everything, but it’s more of a fellow war veteran situation.

So, yeah. It’d be nice to have a friend next semester, that’s all.

The diner is thankfully indeed very close to her place and Robin doesn’t have to embarrass herself any further, pushing the door open to be greeted by the cool air and the fresh smell of bacon. They take a corner booth, tucked away in the back, and Robin orders the largest portion of fries they have with a milkshake while Heather gets a Coke because apparently, Heather doesn’t know how to have fun at a diner.

And for the first time since Starcourt, Robin feels normal. Just a teenager, hanging out at a diner with a friend, not afraid of staring into the shadows.

*

“I just don’t understand,” Steve says, setting the box down on the floor to wipe off the sweat rolling down his forehead. Gross. “How come you’re just sitting there while we do all the heavy work?”

Robin sips her Capri Sun, legs crossed on the new old threadbare couch she and Billy had found in a garage sale two days ago. “I brought some shit up here too,” she gestures the box in the kitchen table messily labeled *KITCHEN SHIT*. “Also, careful with that, I think it’s his records.”

“Shit,” he picks it back up to store it in Billy’s new room, still mostly empty except for the single lonely mattress on the floor and the tacky curtains the previous tenant left. “And you know what, all you brought was like, two duffel bags.”

“I’m here for emotional support,” she shouts, shrugging smugly when Steve walks back in rolling his eyes and Billy kicks the front door closed.

“This is the last one,” he informs them, dropping it by the coffee table and throws himself on the couch, jostling Robin probably on purpose because he’s an asshole. “The fuck’re you talking about?”

Now, it’s not that— it’s not that Robin wants to make a big deal out of this whole thing or anything, but like, Steve’s here and smiling at them and this feels like it’s gonna be another good day in a row, and she kinda wants to know if Billy knows Heather. If a tiny, tiny part of her is sort of bubbling to tell them about her, well. They *are* her best friends, they’ll meet her anyway at some point if they do become friends.

Robin really wishes they will become friends.

So, this is what she means to say: *I think I made a friend*. What she says is: “I met a girl.”

Billy raises his eyebrow, grins proudly. “Yeah? Shit, you got *game* now?”

“Oh, my God, who’s she? Do we know her?” Steve sits on her other side on the couch and now Robin is sandwiched between two grinning idiots who think she suddenly got a girlfriend in the middle of the chaos that was the last month. It’s kind of heartwarming that they think she indeed can flirt with a girl without embarrassing herself like Steve, though. “And most importantly, does she sound like a muppet too? Is that your type?”

“Okay, first of all, *fuck off*,” she socks him on the shoulder, and he laughs, leaning back to dodge her, but Billy pokes the back of her head, looking pointedly in a *well? Details, please?* “Fine, Jeez. It’s not like that, though. I think we’re friends.”

“You don’t know?” Steve makes a face.

“I mean, we did hang out in the diner last night,” Robin trails off, thinking of sharing fries with Heather while she talks about all the weird shit she saw in the pool, her eyes glittering in the artificial lights, none of the shadows from before. She had tied her hair up in a ponytail, curls falling over her shoulder, and Robin had wanted to run her hands through them, see if they were as soft, as velvety as they looked. “That was nice,” she shrugs, “and she looks after my cat when Lizzie barges in her room.”

“Oh fuck, she’s cool with your demon cat?” Billy asks with almost awed eyes, then, meeting Steve’s eyes over Robin’s head, he explains to him, “shitbird’s got this one-eyed black cat—”

“Lizzie’s got *both* eyes! She’s just half-blind!”

“— and she hates like, everyone that isn’t Robin, and *maybe* her mom, she scratched the hell out of my arm last time, the little shit.”

“No way,” Steve breathes, wide-eyed, “she’s gotta marry this girl!”

“Okay, can we just stop the crazy train for a sec here? Please?” She swivels around between the two, feels her face burn and knows she’s probably blushing like crazy. “We’re just friends. And that’s a big maybe already, so– lay off, alright?”

They both nod. It does not look like they’re gonna lay off.

“Fine, yeah, sure, whatever,” Steve waves it off, “are you going to tell us her name?”

Robin sighs, slouching on the cushions. Stray strands of hair fall on her eyes and she debates silently for a second if she should cut it again or simply let it grow because it’s better than listen to their stupid ideas. “Heather Holloway,” she confesses, something tying itself into knots as the name rolls off her tongue and flutters in the air like butterflies. “Her dad owns the paper.”

Billy makes a noise. “No fuckin’ way,” he laughs, “you met Heather?”

It suddenly clicks on her mind why her name sounded so familiar. Maybe she would’ve realized sooner if she hadn’t been so nervous, but she remembers now; a conversation that feels so long ago, *before*, just Billy and Robin talking over lunch in the food court of the mall. Jesus, it does feel like a lifetime ago too. It’s like her life has been divided cleanly in a *before* and *after*, Starcourt Mall right there in the middle, everything from *before* becoming more and more grainy, greying with age, pushed farther and farther from her mind.

“Shit, that’s the girl you wanted me to meet?” She gasps, firmly ignoring whatever else is going on in her ribcage. “So, she’s gay? You’re sure?”

Now, he turns sheepish, hesitant, almost apologetic, or well, the Billy Hargrove version of apologetic. “‘S not like I could *ask* her if she’s queer,” he hedges, rubbing the back of his neck, “but yeah. That’s her. She’s the only fuckin’ person I can stand in that place.”

Robin thinks of Heather’s quick replies and sharp tongue, how her eyes gleamed with wicked glee as she teased her. Yeah, that tracks.

“But you think she might be?” Steve presses, hopeful for her, “I mean, if you were gonna introduced them...”

“I had a feelin’,” Billy says and it’s the most diplomatic Robin’s ever heard him. She’s gonna go ahead and assume he’s got no real proof. “I’ve seen her lookin’ sometimes, at the girls and shit. Dunno, man. Just got a feelin’.”

At that, Steve snorts and teases him about being psychic like El or something and Robin knows the conversation is derailing hopelessly now, but— Steve is smiling here, on Billy’s beat-up couch, and the tightness is easing around his eyes into laughter lines. It’s like rewinding time. Robin doesn’t have the heart to interrupt, she watches them bicker instead and wonders if there’s still something salvageable in this summer after all.

*

Pinpricks of rocks hit her window like tiny falling stars knocking for her attention, and Robin is fully prepared to yell at either Billy or Steve or even maybe one of the other shithead kids for throwing gravel at the glass, only to stop short at the sight in her driveway.

“Thought I’d save you the walk,” Heather grins, standing there, under her window, a perfect mirror from the other nights, and Robin can’t help smiling back as Lizzie jumps from her arms to dash inside the house. Tonight, Heather is *here* and Robin is buzzing with a sort of nervous excitement like a rule is being broken. Something shifts, glints in a new light, and— “hey, did you hear about the new ice cream place?”

“On Main Street?” She asks, leaning out until she feels the drop in her stomach that she tells herself is all from fear of falling. “Yeah,” a pause. It’s a mystery how Heather can stand there so confidently, backlit with the orange sunset, ablaze. She’s a whole forest fire all by herself, lit up in Robin’s front yard and demanding all her attention. Not that Robin hesitates to oblige. Where else would she look? “Why? You feel like getting a sundae?”

Heather grins brighter. “Maybe. You feel like braving this ocean of flavors with me?”

Motherf— Robin groans. “I thought you didn’t know about that,” she deflates, waning a bit and slumping in defeat. If Steve were here, she would tell him to start a *YOU SUCK* tally for her. Not that this situation is similar to his in any way. This is— completely different. Totally.

“A mutual friend disclosed this information,” Heather says haughtily as if admitting to negotiating with the FBI or something, “top secret, he tells me.”

Seriously, Robin is gonna *kill* Billy. She’s gonna murder him and it’s gonna be real drawn out and real painful.

Not that it stops her from groaning again and heaving a sigh. “Hargrove’s a dead man,” she informs her flatly before shaking her head, “I’ll be down in a sec, hold on.”

Robin slips on her jacket and rushes downstairs, a quick *I’m going out with a friend* thrown over her shoulder, Heather’s laughter echoing in her mind all the while. It sounds like wind chimes rattling in the fall, a promise of different days waiting around the corner.

*

“What do you think of this one?” Robin asks, sliding the newspaper towards Steve. He has a red marker on his fingers and it’s staining everything, but he still pauses on his own hunt to look it over. “Seems like they might have two openings.”

“I mean,” he scratches his head, considering it, “it could be worse, I guess?”

“We’ll never find a job if you keep being so picky,” she rolls her eyes, leaning back on her chair. They have been at this for almost two weeks now, school is starting soon and Robin really needs a job, but progress has been slow. Finding a place willing to hire *two* people has definitely made it harder, not that any of them would change anything. They’re a package deal now.

She glances at the clock. “Whatever, we gotta go now anyway, Billy’s shift is over and Heather likes to watch the trailers.”

“*Whipped*,” Steve fake-coughs and if Robin hasn’t been still afraid he’d go back to the zombie-like way he’d been after the funerals, she’d smack him over the head. “But sure, I’m *dying* to finally meet your girlfriend.”

“Shut up,” she says mildly, too used to his teasing by now, and totally does not check her hair in the mirror.

*

It shouldn't matter so much how well Heather gets along with Steve. Robin still aches, not that it matters.

*

Senior year is a strange affair.

The hallways are crowded like always and everyone is chatting like always, and Robin doesn't know how to act like nothing happened. Like her world didn't shift irrevocably during the summer. And to make it worse, there’s no Steve and there’s no Billy, and Robin feels lonelier than ever. Her classmates, even Tammy, seem too different, clueless as they are, like a wall has been built between them and Robin.

It’s very lonely to keep a secret.

But—

“Hey, looking sharp today,” Heather says, bounding up to her side and leaning against Robin’s locker. Her hair is up in a ponytail today and she’s smiling brightly. Robin’s mood

lifts already. “Ready for our last year?”

“Hi,” she blows a breath, hoping to steady herself and not blurt out how little this all means when compared to the fucking alternate reality that lives underneath the city or something, “sort of? I just want it to *end*.”

Heather makes a face, pushing herself off just in time for the bell to ring. “What class you’ve got?”

“APBio,” Robin squints at her schedule, “then APUSH.”

“Ouch,” she winces dramatically, falling into step with her, and most kids make way for them because Heather, unlike Robin, is not a loser, “how about third period? I’ve got gym.”

Now, that’s one good news. *Maybe*. Actually, she’s not too sure, this might be a disaster. “Same,” she smiles without noticing; it’s just the effect Heather has on people, “looks like we’ve got a class together.”

Heather grins. It blinds everything in a five-mile radius. “Looks like it.”

Sure, senior year is gonna be strange as fuck, but maybe, *just maybe*, that doesn’t have to be a bad thing.

*

“Are you ready to admit you’re in love?” Billy asks her in the middle of Steve’s kitchen, fluorescent light bathing everything off-white. If she leans over the counter, Robin can see Heather sitting on the living room floor.

“No,” Robin says, gathering the popcorn like her hands aren’t shaking. She glances up, “are you?”

A pause. Steve is laughing in the living room.

“Maybe.”

*

When Nancy Wheeler drops into the seat in front of her in the cafeteria, Robin most definitely doesn't startle. Not even when Jonathan Byers follows her a second later.

“Hi,” Nancy says with a smile, and Robin can kinda see why Steve had been so wrapped around her finger, “we wanted to talk with you— sorry, I don't think we've met? Gosh, it feels I'm saying this a lot lately.”

The last question is directed to Heather, who had just settled down beside Robin, her apple shining a spotless red on her tray, and she grins back at Nancy with the confidence of someone who's been a lifeguard all summer. “Hey, I'm Heather, I'm Robin's friend.”

“Nancy,” and there's something so relieving to hear Heather refer to her as *friends*, even if they've been having lunch together everyday since school started, even if they still go get ice cream every time Lizzie barges in her room. “And this is Jonathan, it's very nice to meet you.”

Heather makes a non-committal noise, choosing to smile brilliantly at Robin. She takes a bite out of her apple, studying Nancy and Jonathan as she chews. “So. You were saying?”

“Right, right,” Nancy shakes her head, Jonathan fidgeting uncomfortably at her side, “okay. *We*,” she says, smiling shyly at her puppy of a boyfriend, “were thinking of re-opening the school's newspaper!”

“Uh,” Robin says, blinking at her excited face. Nancy’s grinning like she’s just told them they’re winning some big-ass prize and not trying to resuscitate something that’s been dead for longer than Robin’s been alive, probably. “That’s– good luck?”

Nancy falters, valiantly recovers. “Thank you. Anyway, I was thinking– Jonathan can take the pictures, of course, and I could write most of it, sure, but– we need more reporters.”

“And an editor,” adds Jonathan.

“You want us to write for the school paper?” Heather raises her eyebrows, “I mean, no offense, you wanna play Nancy Drew, go for it, but I think I’ll have to say no.”

Now, the princess bristles. “I’m not *playing Nancy Drew*, ” she snaps and even Jonathan grows some balls to glare. Heather keeps eating her apple, unfazed. “I just think it’s about time we gave a voice to the students. Did you know they cut the art department’s budget in half last year? And they’re trying to starve the theater club of money just because it’s not *essential*.”

Okay, no, with all the shit that went down in the last couple years, Robin has to be impressed– where the fuck did she find the time to investigate all this?

“Shit, you really wanna do this,” Robin nudges Heather’s foot with her sneaker under the table, a subtle *be nice*, and they trade a look that she can’t quite interpret, “that’s cool, dude. But why are you asking *us*? Don’t you have like, journalist buddies or something?”

“No,” Nancy says bluntly. She shrugs, hair bobbing with the motion, still in those awkward post-perm stages, and completely unashamed to admit it. “And besides. I’d like to consider you a... friend.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan scratches the back of his neck, not unlike Steve when he’s nervous, “after, hm, *this summer*. I think we’re friends.”

Are they, though? Do near-death experiences make up a solid foundation for a friendship? Robin feels weirdly close to them, that's true. They all share the same secret, after all.

"Okay," Heather draws out the word, making a face, "because this isn't weird at all."

To be fair, Nancy has the self-awareness to look sheepish. "Sorry. But anyway, now you guys know and the offer is there," her fingers work primly over an old newspaper, or maybe their trial run with the printing machine, and she almost looks nervous, "if you guys change your mind—"

Robin thinks of her long afternoons doing fuck-all either at the quarry with Billy or at Steve's house with Steve. She thinks of how boredom only makes her memories of that night sharper, brings nightmares to the surface. And, at last, she thinks of how much Ms. Carter had to fight tooth and nail to keep the band's budget last year.

"I'm in," she decides, watching Nancy grin, kind of relieved at the news. Huh, maybe they *are* pressed for workers.

Heather heaves a long-suffering sigh, tossing her apple core to the nearest trash can. "Fine, I guess I'm in too."

Nancy's eyebrows climb impressively high and she trades a look with Jonathan. "Oh, that's great! I have to stop by the library now, but we'll keep you posted about what the administration says!"

They leave hurriedly in the direction opposite the library and Robin forcefully doesn't worry about demogorgons and Upside Down shit.

"I can't believe I just signed up for one of your nerdy clubs," Heather rests her face in her fist, giving Robin a strange smile. She doesn't look too upset over it. "You owe me *at least* a milkshake for it, Buckley."

There are absolutely no butterflies fluttering up a storm in Robin's stomach as she regards the possibility of going out for ice cream with Heather again, no runaway cat to excuse it. There's something undeniably hungry about the excitement she feels, familiar and new all at once. "I suppose I do, Holloway," she smiles, "George's after my band practice?"

"I'll wait for you at the library," Heather agrees, and Robin tries not to think about her willingness to wait out the hour and a half that it takes practice to be over.

Much like with anything else she tries to repress, she fails.

*

"Okay, so," Robin says, passing the joint back, "I heard you're spending an awful lot of time with Steve lately."

Billy huffs, groans like Robin's getting on his case about something stupid when they've both know shit's been weird between those two for a while now. It's almost Halloween, for fuck's sake, and they're still joined at the hip or something. "We're friends," he shrugs, all nonchalant, and Robin snorts, "I'm serious. We both have jack-shit to do so we hang out."

"Dude," she laughs, feeling the grass on her skin and the open sky above her. During the day, there's something peaceful about the quarry, especially without the kid squad running around and making a big ruckus. "That's like— okay, I know Steve and I know you, and I'm a big homo, so I have some authority to say it— there's nothing straight about that."

"Shut the fuck up, shitbird," he snaps and Robin's fairly sure he's blushing, and throws a bunch of torn-up grass at her face, "that's— it's not like that. Steve's not— *Steve's not*, okay?"

Robin thinks of the past months and how Steve's been slowly getting better. How he helped Billy move out into his own apartment. How whenever Robin's hanging out with him, he inevitably brings up Billy. She thinks of that time in the bathroom where he had cut himself off. Steve's never been very good at hiding his heart.

“Dunno, man,” she says, watching the clouds, “I think you’d be surprised. Sometimes you gotta take that leap of faith, you know?”

A car drives by, tires loud over the gravel, far enough away that it sounds like something happening outside a dream. Billy sighs, blows smoke. “That’s not a leap of faith, that’s getting yourself killed.”

“Come on,” Robin pokes his shoulder, “you don’t believe that, you can’t think Steve would do that. He’s fine with me, he’s been freaking trying to get me to admit I like Heather for fucking forever.”

“That’s different,” he grumbles, but it sounds less bleak, less depressed. Almost hopeful. “By the way, when *are* you asking her out?”

“Big words coming from the guy that’s refusing to ask *his* crush out.”

“So you admit you’re a fucking goner for her?” Billy turns to look at her, shit-eating grin on his face like an annoying goddamn maniac.

And in any other time, Robin would deny fiercely, shake her head until she’s blue in the face, but— it’s Billy and the weed is kicking in, making her mellow, softer, gentler. Honest. “Yeah,” she says, smiling, “I’m a fucking goner for her.”

She thinks of Heather’s smile, the way she leaned against her side when laughing in the cafeteria last week, and yeah. There’s no denying it. Robin’s a fucking *goner*.

*

“Hm. Billy?”

“Yeah?” The answer comes from the kitchen and Robin feels inclined to scurry away to the safety of not being in the living room. Because, you see, in the middle of the living room, sitting awkwardly on Billy’s beat-up couch and watching morning cartoons with a bored face that perks up considerably when she catches sight of Robin is a teenage girl. More specifically, not just any teenage girl– the one with powers from Starcourt Mall. El or Jane, she’s still not completely sure.

“Why is there a teenager in your living room?” Robin asks, still frozen in the doorway. El’s lips twitch in a smile. Still, she feels the need to add, “no offense.”

“Oh, right,” and it’s not Billy who exits the kitchen, but Steve, with a dishcloth thrown over his shoulder and popcorn kernels in his hair. Yeah, you know what, Robin’s not really keen on checking the kitchen anymore. “Billy’s renting some movies. *And* El’s here ‘cause Mrs.Byers is taking Hopper to check on his burns and they put me on babysitting duty.”

“Jim needs to be more careful,” El says from the couch, face serious, “he doesn’t like to follow instructions.”

While Robin doesn’t particularly like to think of that night or the state the Sheriff had been in, she supposes he must be getting better now if his daughter is here. He did look less bandaged up at the funerals. “Okay,” she nods, taking in everything, “hey, I guess.”

“Hi,” El waves cheerfully.

Steve turns to Robin and shrugs like that’s just a normal day in his life and hey, maybe it is. There have certainly been crazier things in their lives. “And uh, how’s the Sheriff?”

“Better,” she smiles and looks just like any other teenager, nothing that screams *can throw a car with my mind*, and Robin relaxes enough to step inside, kicking her shoes by the door. “Joyce says he would be all fine by now if he weren’t so stubborn, though.”

“That’s fair,” Robin chuckles, sitting down in the carpet to dump the books she found in her attic while Steve scurries back to the kitchen; they’re all kinda dusty and yellowed, but the pages are all there. They look kinda gross but they’re still whole, they’re still good. Anyway,

she had been meaning to ask if Billy wants any of them before she donates what's left to the library or something. "Hey," she says instead, picking up a well-worn book that had been plucked from her own shelf, "you ever heard of Jane Austen?"

El tilts her head, accepting the book with careful hands, "no, I haven't read many books," the kid has her eyes on the cover, tracing the letters with her fingers. There's a reverence to the way she does it, like she's holding something precious, a treasure, and it cements in Robin's mind what she's gonna do next.

"This one is my favorite," Robin comments, smiling at the memories of reading it time and time again until all hours of the night, "I think you'd like it. Do you want it?"

"Really?" El breathes, biting her lips. Her eyes are wide and doe-like and Robin nods. When she had decided to clean out her some of her stuff to make it easier when she moves out, she had been nervous to part with this book. *Pride and Prejudice* will always have a special place in her heart, all things considered, and the thought of giving it away to some random stranger, someone who might not take as good care of it as Robin did— it was kinda harrowing. But she can see El will be kind to it. And hey, maybe it will help her like it helped Robin. "Thank you!"

Bony little arms wrap around Robin's neck for a quick seconds before the kid lets her go in favor of flipping through the pages, seemingly already engrossed with the book without even beginning to read. The language might be a little complicated for her if the stuff Steve told Robin is true, but if the Sheriff is as whipped as he seems every time Robin sees him around town with El toting behind him, she can picture him, all gruff and awkward, reading it out loud for her.

It's the kind of thing Robin would very much like to have visual proof of.

Thankfully, before El loses interest in her gift, there's a commotion in the hallway outside and soon enough the door is swinging open, Billy marching in with a pizza box in hand and Max slipping past. "Jesus Christ, Maxine," he snaps, "chill the fuck out, I told she's here."

"El!" Max screeches, throwing herself on the couch beside El, "oh my god, I have so much to tell you!"

El grins wider than Robin's seen her do it in like, ever, and shifts in the cushions to face Max. "About Lucas?"

"Well, him too, I guess," Max shrugs, rolling her eyes, "but you won't believe—"

Their conversation trails off into the usual freshman drama and Robin shakes her head, biting back a snicker, deciding checking on the pizza might be a better alternative. She pokes her head in the kitchen, ready to demand a slice before the grasshoppers in the living room devour the whole thing, but the scene inside gives her pause.

Against the sink, Steve and Billy are talking in low tones and Billy says something that makes Steve laugh, head thrown back, and splash some water at him in retaliation. Billy scowls for all of a second before cackling loudly.

It's the happiest she's seen Steve since Starcourt. They don't talk about Tommy or even Carol, but Robin's seen how their deaths haunted Steve all summer long, listened to him scream himself awake from nightmares and pretended he hadn't screamed their names too. But it's fall now.

Summer's over.

And Steve is laughing in the kitchen of Billy's apartment and Robin thinks this might be the happiest she's seen Billy, too.

Pizza can wait. Robin's not even *that* hungry, anyway.

*

Honestly, this was bound to happen at some point, Robin's almost surprised it took Heather this long to find out, really.

She had been bound to find Robin is apparently friends with a bunch of annoying-ass freshmen.

It happens on a Sunday before they were all meant to go to the movies. Billy's apartment is, as always, their meet-up place because they're all lazy fucks who'd much rather have one of the boys drive them to Main Street.

Today, though, Billy had been talking with the mechanic at Jackson St. and run late enough that it was easier if he just picked Robin up before going to his place. That had been a mistake.

Because, see, once they're close enough to his apartment, they can hear Dustin's loud voice, brimming with indignation. "Well, shit," Billy glares at the closed door, "I'm gonna kill Harrington if he let that kid in."

Steve had, indeed, let that kid in.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS, STEVE," Dustin is screeching, hands on his hips while Steve is slumped on the couch, head on his hands, with Heather beside him, looking confused and—*holy shit, thank god*—almost amused. "SINCE WHEN DO YOU HAVE FRIENDS THAT AREN'T US?"

"Who the fuck let the gremlin in?" Billy demands, closing the door behind him, "get the hell out, Henderson."

"FUCK OFF, HARGROVE," Dustin yells back, whirling on Billy now, "HOW COME *YOU* HAVE FRIENDS? WHAT GIVES, HM? WHAT GIVES?"

"*Jesus Christ.*"

“WE ARE FRIENDS, STEVEN, WE WERE SUPPOSED TO TELL EACH OTHER EVERYTHING!” He points an accusing finger at Steve and Heather chokes on a laughter, hands flying to her mouth. “AND GUESS WHAT? FRIENDS DON’T LIE!”

“OH MY GOD, DUSTIN, I DIDN’T LIE—”

The argument continues and Robin slips to Heather’s side, cringing at the crazy people screaming at each other in front of them. “Sorry about them,” she says awkwardly, gesturing the scene unfolding, “sometimes they can be uh... *a lot.*”

But instead of walking out the door or being scared away, Heather laughs, eyes shining with humor. “They’re something else alright,” she snorts, leaning closer to Robin, “but come on, where else would we find this level of drama? Seriously, this is better than any of my mom’s soap operas.”

This feels strangely defining, Robin thinks. Like one of those *break or make* moments, as if her reaction to Dustin screaming his head off in Billy’s living room would be what determines if Heather would fit or not in their group. And Robin has long since given up on pretending she doesn’t want her to be a part of this, to be there, at her side, always. She’s not sure what she would do if Heather didn’t like her friends.

So maybe, she’s almost thankful that Dustin is an insane person. If Heather likes him, she’ll be fine with the rest of the kids.

“Five bucks says Steve bribes him with ice cream,” Heather says, smiling mischievously in that way that makes Robin’s heart skip so many beats.

“Screw it,” Robin snickers, sitting on the arm of the couch and exhaling shakily when Heather immediately leans against her, “ten says Billy kicks them both out.”

Heather grins. “Deal,” and Robin can’t even tell if she wants to win or not.

*

Halloween comes and goes with no one really in the spirit of celebrating. They think about going to one of the parties but Robin can't say she is a party-person, especially when looking at the shadows in Hawkins seems to make them stare right back at you.

“So,” says Heather from where she's lying on Robin's bed, legs dangling at the side, “you should tell Steve to make a move soon because Billy's never gonna do it and I'm getting kinda sick of their pining.”

It knocks the air out of Robin's lungs. She had been working on her resume, making shit up to convince Keith to give her and Steve the job, and while she's always aware of Heather, the constant reminder in the back of her mind that she is there, in Robin's room, on Robin's bed—she hadn't been expecting that.

Maybe it's the casual way Heather mentions it as if it's normal, as if discussing the news, one of her gossip magazines, and Robin can't fucking breathe right now. Her heart is beating out of rhythm and she drops her pen abruptly. “Excuse me?” She whirls around in her chair, hopes her eyes are not as wide as she thinks they might be, “I don't— I mean, they're not— hold on, where did you—”

“Relax,” Heather snorts, head lolling to look at Robin, “I know about him, too. I mean, they never told me or anything, but these boys aren't exactly *subtle*. ”

Robin forces a laugh, retying her hair just to have something to do with her hands. “Oh, okay,” she exhales, “I guess so. I— hold on, and you're okay with that?”

“Yeah, I mean, it would be— nevermind,” Heather shakes her head, glances back up to the ceiling, sighs, “I'm cool with them, is what I mean.”

“Cool,” Robin echoes, “cool. I'm, uh, I'm— I'm cool with them too. Just so you know.”

“Okay,” Heather’s eyes skirted to hers for a second before averting away again. She clears her throat, “anyway, when do you think they’ll get their shit together?”

“Honestly?” Robin pretends she’s back in control of herself and not still panicking, “dunno. They’re both stubborn assholes, so who knows.”

Heather grins. It looks a bit wrong, though, different from what Robin is used, less bright. She chalks it up to annoyance. “Wanna bet?”

“You have a gambling problem,” Robin laughs, and the room deflates all at once.

*

They're at Steve's place and Steve is wrestling with the grill, and Robin is watching Heather poke fun at his inability to light up a fire, and the sun is hitting her just right, making her skin glow, eyes bright and laughter loud. Something golden fills Robin in a way it never did with Tammy Thompson.

She thinks it’s because she knows Heather— if she thought she had been loving Tammy from afar, it's got nothing on loving Heather from this close.

“Careful,” Billy snickers, sidling up to her with a beer on his hand and a stupid smirk on his stupid face, “your pining is showing.”

“Fuck you,” she replies idly. There’s something about today that’s making it hard to be pissed. Maybe it’s because it’s warm out without it being summer, so they can enjoy it outside without feeling that lingering guilt over surviving something half the town didn’t even know they had to be on the lookout for, and— “when are *you* growing some balls?”

Billy doesn’t answer immediately and Robin follows his gaze, sees Steve throwing a burger on fire in the pool while Heather nearly falls down along cackling and has to sit down in one of the reclining chairs.

Yes, these are the dorks they're in love with.

“Do you really fucking mean that?” Billy asks and Robin startles with how nervous he sounds. If there's something about today that is different, then there's something different about Billy too. Like he might believe her this time when she says, “*yeah, I really fucking do.*”

“For the record,” he says, and throws his arms around her shoulder, “I really fucking mean it too.”

It rushes blood to her face, Robin can feel it, but today feels like a different kind of summer, gentler, softer, right in the middle of the fall, and if the sun is shining here, in dreary Hawkins, off season, then maybe— maybe April showers really do bring May flowers. Or, you know, November ones at least.

Surprisingly, this doesn't bother her. Normally, she'd be freaking the fuck out, spiraling over every little interaction, but today, today she just shakes her head and sets off to enjoy her day.

They make burgers and get buzzed and at some point, someone drops a whole chair in the pool that no one really feels like retrieving. Until, of course, Heather turns to her with a wicked grin that makes Robin weak at the knees and pushes her into the water.

Robin, *of course*, does not go down alone. She latches into Heather's arms and brings her underwater with her, splashing everything in their vicinity. “You *jerk*,” Robin laughs, coughing up water as they come up for air, “I could've drowned!”

“Nah,” Heather says, closer than Robin had expected, smiles, “I was a lifeguard, remember? I'd save you.”

Strangely, Robin loses her breath all over again, helpless to the way they're gravitating towards each other. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she echoes and it hits Robin suddenly how alone they are in Steve’s backyard. He and Billy have disappeared inside and there’s only the woods behind them, the sun setting and washing everything in orange light. Heather is looking at her and Robin is going to burn up in the water, “I was– Billy thinks I should be honest,” Heather murmurs, reaches to brush some of Robin’s hair from her face, and her voice is wrecked, hesitant, nothing at all like her usual confidence, and Robin wants– she *wants*, “I’m– shit, can I show you instead?”

Hope is a thing with feathers and right now it’s fluttering against Robin’s ribs like a bird in a cage, and Robin simply nods because if she opens her mouth she’s going to say too much, too soon, but Heather is smiling tentatively and leaning closer, hands shaking as they settle on Robin’s hips and Robin holds on to Heather’s shirt for dear life, and then– then, they’re kissing.

Heather tastes like bubblegum and the cheap beer they had been drinking and cherries, and you know what, if this is the closest thing to Heaven Robin’s ever going to be, then she’s more than fine with it. They kiss in Steve’s pool and Robin is so in love, it feels like she’s going to overflow. It feels like it’s in her bloodstream, in her bones, down to the marrow. There’s Robin and there’s Heather, and now that she knows how it feels to be close enough to count her freckles, Robin thinks she’d die if she gave that up.

“Hey,” Robin says against her lips and Heather smiles.

The clock starts for the rest of their lives.

*

They stay in the pool for the longest of time, or maybe just like, another half an hour, but for Robin, it’s eternity in a coffee spoon, but eventually, they have to leave.

It’s uncomfortable to let go of Heather’s hand when they cross the threshold of the house and it kind of makes her stomach churn, but their hands brush together as they walk and Heather offers her a private, happy, little smile, and– Robin can deal with that, yeah.

In any case, she has to rush back inside because she forgot her backpack on the couch, and Robin nearly topples over on the carpet when she hears the hushed conversation drifting from the kitchen.

“Well, fuck, you know I love you, you gotta know,” comes Billy’s voice, “Steve, this is the one fucking thing I’m sure.”

“You–” Steve’s reply is cut short by a strangled sound, like he’s choking, like he’s overwhelmed, “shit, Billy, I didn’t think you’d– I swear to god, if you’re just fucking with me–”

There’s a pause. Robin holds her breath. Then, *“I love you too, of course I love you too.”*

That’s it, she shouldn’t be hearing this, Robin needs to leave before one of them spots her and they *both* flip the fuck out. She grabs her bag and hurries back to Heather’s car as quietly as she can, silently deciding to withhold this information. This is the sort of thing they have the right to decide when to tell, it’s *their* narrative.

“All good?” Heather asks, reapplying her cherry lipstick in the rearview mirror, and Robin can’t help smiling. This is the prettiest girl she knows and she wants to be with Robin.

“Yup,” she says, relaxing into her seat, “all good.”

Heather pulls out of the driveway and into the road before speaking again, sheepish and uncharacteristically shy, “hey, remember that night when I was guessing your name?”

“Oh, yeah, that was pretty embarrassing for you.”

“Totally, but like. I think you should know,” she clears her throat, glancing fleetingly at her, “my first guess was Helen because I– because I thought you were the most beautiful girl in the world.”

The words are at the tip of her tongue and Robin almost says it, then, but holds them back, rolling them over her tongue. A lot happened today, a miracle, a dream, all the too-good-to-be-trues she had locked in her heart, and now Heather is here, with her, and for the first time since Starcourt, the future looks bright.

When she thinks *there'll be time*, she believes it.

Their fingers are joined on the gear stick and they're in love; Robin isn't afraid to see what tomorrow is gonna bring.

Chapter End Notes

oh my god, okay, this is finally done, I can't believe I've actually finished this! Thank you so much to everyone who read this and followed it-- it means a lot to me!

I hope the ending lives up to your expectations, and again-- thank you! <3

End Notes

and hey? thanks.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!